

“Tails” of Masculinity: Knights, Clerics, and the Mutilation of Horses in Medieval England

By Andrew G. Miller

In the days preceding the murder of Thomas Becket, the archbishop of Canterbury (29 December 1170), members of the Broc family—servants of King Henry II (r. 1154–89), who fought with Becket over the Canterbury estates during his exile (since 1167)—invaded the archbishop’s park, butchered his deer, and stole his hunting dogs. On Christmas Eve, either Robert de Broc or his nephew, John, went so far as to dock, or cut off the tail of, a horse (or horses) in Becket’s service carrying household provisions; the horse was brought before the archbishop for him to see.¹ Contemporaries suggest that Becket understood the overt message of terror, defamation, and emasculation that the knights communicated through attacking his animals. Indeed, no fewer than five of Becket’s biographers made it a point to mention the equestrian mutilation at the hands of the Brocs and to employ, to quote Hugh Thomas, “the rich Latin vocabulary of shame: ‘*dederus, contemptus, ignominia, dehonestatio, opprobrium*’ in their descriptions of the tail excision.² One chronicler insists that when news of the carnage reached the archbishop he exclaimed that “a mare in my service has in contempt of my name had its tail cut off—as though I could be put to shame by the mutilation of a beast!”³ Yet Becket suffered sufficient embarrassment to conclude Christmas Mass at Canterbury Cathedral by excommunicating Robert de Broc, among others. Four days later, a band of Henry II’s knights—having crossed over from France, rendezvoused at the Brocs’ castle, and been led to the archbishop by none other than Robert de Broc—spilled Becket’s brains onto the

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¹ James C. Robertson and Joseph B. Sheppard, eds., *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury*, 7 vols. (London: Longman, 1875–85), 1:55, 117; 2:7, 404, 428; 3:24, 26, 360; 4:65; 5:152; 6:278, 300, 449, 582; Michael Staunton, *Thomas Becket and His Biographers* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2006), 154–55, 186–87, 189, 202–3.

² Hugh Thomas has a most informative discussion of the uses of violence, shame, and the language of masculinity in the volatile conflicts between Henry II and Thomas Becket, among other churchmen, in which he situates this act of equestrian mutilation: “Shame, Masculinity, and the Death of Thomas Becket,” *Speculum* 87 (2012): 1050–88. I would like to thank Professor Thomas for sharing his research with me prior to publication.

³ As translated by George Neilson, “Caudatus Anglicus: A Mediaeval Slander,” *Transactions of the Glasgow Archaeological Society*, n.s., 2 (1896): 441–47, at 446; “Jumentum in nominis mei contemptum, tanquam in diminutione bestiae dehonestari possim, cauda truncatum est”: Robertson and Sheppard, *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket*, 1:130.

cathedral floor.⁴ Predictably, the archbishop's martyrdom has shifted focus away from the violence directed against his animals in the days preceding his death. Nevertheless, these incidents reveal power struggles between secular and ecclesiastical authorities and provide opportunities to explore the roles that prized beasts played in conflicts between powerful men in the Middle Ages. By terrorizing Becket's deer, dogs, and horse, the Broc family and their supporters waged symbolic war against the archbishop via his living possessions, targeting the very creatures that represented Becket's secular—and masculine—presence and influence as archdiocesan overlord.⁵

This article explores what it meant to dock a horse against its master's will in Europe in the Middle Ages and attempts to narrow down the origins and specific meaning and uses of equestrian mutilation in medieval England. Dozens of examples of this provocative form of violence survive in contemporary chronicles and in legal, ecclesiastical, and royal sources, as well as in literature. Occasionally, malevolent tail docking was accompanied by cutting off the mane, ears, and lips of the horse. Despite the wide variety of historical and literary instances of such equestrian tail excision, the overall message of this form of violence might be categorized as public defamation and ridicule of the horse's rider or owner; it may also be interpreted as a kind of bloody enfeeblement—or figurative castration—of the beast's master; and it was possibly related to a Norse tradition of trading bestiality insults. It appears that this violent ritual was imported to England by the Normans in 1066, quickly took on a life all its own, and may be understood in gendered, cultural terms: after all, the Normans employed castration and blinding to emasculate an opponent or punish a transgressor.⁶

While docking an adversary's horse held meaning for knights throughout medieval Europe, principally in situations involving the payment of ransoms, the act was also employed in England to rebuke a messenger bearing unwanted news and to defame his dispatcher, as well as to scorn churchmen during disputes. Knights and other laymen occasionally paraded the clerical—but apparently *not* lay—victims around on their bloodied beasts, a degrading form of charivari more often associated with early-modern bawds and cuckolds than medieval churchmen. The laymen, in order to avoid excessive violence against the clerics themselves, used the performance of equestrian mutilation as a substitute for violence between the human players, for violence inflicted upon the animal is potential violence against its master. Knights were able to emasculate and disparage the clerical body via their noble, masculine animals. By removing a phallic-like extension of the horse the aggressor rendered its owner—whether a knight or layman, monk or priest—symbolically less powerful and publicly deprived him of reputation.

⁴ Robertson and Sheppard, *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket*, 1:61, 127–31; 2:428; 3:29, 130, 488; 4:359; 5:83, 88, 91, 95; 6:559, 561, 573, 583–85.

⁵ I have analyzed elsewhere the violence waged against Becket's deer parks: "Knights, Bishops and Deer Parks: Episcopal Identity, Emasculation and Clerical Space in Medieval England," in *Negotiating Clerical Identities: Priests, Monks and Masculinity in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jennifer Thibodeaux (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 204–37.

⁶ Klaus van Eickels, "Gendered Violence: Castration and Blinding as Punishment for Treason in Normandy and Anglo-Norman England," *Gender and History* 16 (2004): 588–602, esp. 594.

For centuries scholars have been intrigued by the docking of Thomas Becket's horse on Christmas Eve 1170 and especially by the peculiar medieval legend that arose thereafter that the Brocs' descendants, followed by Kentishmen (Canterbury lies in Kent) and eventually all Englishmen, grew tails as punishment for their complicity in the crime; they became "tailed (*caudati*)."⁷ For example, J. A. Giles, in his *Chronicles of the Crusades* (1848), laments in a rare footnote concerning King Richard I's crusade (1189–92)—during which the Greek-speaking inhabitants of Sicily hurled the "tailed Englishman" insult at Richard's men—that "the origin of this joke is unknown."⁸ The meaning of this gibe continues to elude modern researchers, too. David Boyle, in his *Troubadour's Song* (2005), is confounded by Jacques de Vitry's description (ca. 1220) of English students in Paris as drunkards with tails, noting that "it was a long-standing joke among the continentals that the English had tails. Quite what this meant—and it was unlikely to have been meant literally—has been lost in the mists of time."⁹

George Neilson had, in fact, first parted these temporal mists in 1896, with his seminal piece, "*Caudatus Anglicus: A Mediaeval Slander*."¹⁰ Neilson traced the insult back to the late twelfth century and argued that the alleged curse—and subsequent taunt—that resulted from the docking of Becket's horse became conflated with an earlier tale regarding Saint Augustine, who had arrived in Canterbury in 597 to convert the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity. Legend has it that some unimpressed locals deridingly attached fish tails (likely from a ray) to Augustine's cloak; as a result, Kentishmen grew their accursed tails.¹¹ Academics have since expanded upon and refined Neilson's research,¹² though references to

⁷ It appears that this equine condition cleared up by the English Civil War. Richard Baker, writing in 1643, notes in the section devoted to the life and reign of Henry II that "it may be thought a fable, yet it is related by divers good Authors, that one time during this contention, certain fellows cut off the Archbishop's Horse's tail; after which fact all their children were born with tails like Horses, and that this continued long in the [sic] Posterity, though now long since ceased, and perhaps their families too": *A Chronicle of the Kings of England* (London: Frere, 1643), 57; I have modernized some of the spelling.

⁸ J. A. Giles, ed., *Chronicles of the Crusades: Being Contemporary Narratives of the Crusade of Richard Coeur de Lion* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1848), 15.

⁹ David Boyle, *Troubadour's Song: The Capture, Imprisonment and Ransom of Richard the Lionheart* (New York: Walker, 2005), 212.

¹⁰ Neilson, "Caudatus Anglicus," 441–69.

¹¹ In classical Latin *caudam trahere* meant "to have a tail stuck on in mockery, to be made a fool of": Charlton Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), 303. Also, *caudam jactare popello* meant "to flatter, fawn upon" (*ibid.*). Indeed, in ca. 1180 Peter of Celle admonished Bernier, the abbot of Saint-Crispin in Soissons, for expressing feelings of self-importance after his one-on-one meeting with the countess of Troyes, telling Bernier that he had "returned with the long tail of pride": Peter of Celle, *Epistola* 101, cited by Ad Putter, "Knights and Clerics at the Court of Champagne: Chrétien de Troyes's Romances in Context," in *Medieval Knighthood*, 5, ed. Stephen Church and Ruth Harvey (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 1995), 243–66, at 257 n. 72.

¹² Peter Rickard, "Anglois coué and l'Anglois qui couve," *French Studies* 7 (1953): 48–55; Rickard, *Britain in Medieval French Literature, 1100–1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 165–66; Lilian M. C. Randall, "A Medieval Slander," *Art Bulletin* 42 (1960): 25–38, esp. 33–35; Alan Smith, "St Augustine of Canterbury in History and Tradition," *Folklore* 89 (1978): 23–28; Sandra Billington, "Routes and Reyes," *Folklore* 89 (1978): 184–200; Derek Brewer, "Englishmen with Tails: Lazamon, 'Muggles' and a Transhistorical Ethnic Joke in English," in *Medieval Heritage: Essays in Honour of Tadahiro Ikegami*, ed. Masahiko Kanno (Tokyo: Yushodo Press, 1997), 3–15.

“tailed Englishmen” continue to turn up.¹³ With the exception of Malcolm Jones, scholars have focused more on the rich literary treatment of this motif than on historical sources pertaining to the disfigurement of horses like Becket’s.¹⁴ Jones, however, despite the sweeping nature of his study,¹⁵ limits his search of English historical records to collections such as the *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* and *Medieval Legal Records*.¹⁶ By casting a wider net over a deeper pool of historical sources, this article attempts to uncover the origins and possible meanings of this notable medieval slander, to categorize and analyze a body of examples of malevolent tail docking in the Middle Ages, and to posit why excising the tails of horses that belonged to clerics like Thomas Becket constituted a particularly stinging message of defamation and enfeeblement—one that spoke to the heart of medieval manhood.

HORSES AND MASCULINITY IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Among all creatures in the animal kingdom, a fine horse—like hawks and hunting dogs—afforded its medieval master the greatest status because it accompanied him in the manly tasks of war and hunting, instead of labor. A real man, moreover, was expected to know how to care for his prized beasts.¹⁷ Few greater

¹³ For example, “Only that flatterer Vincent, laying claim to the title alone of dean, drags everything behind him with his English tail (*Anglica post se cauda trahit omnia*)”: Hugh of Poitiers, *The Vézelay Chronicle*, ed. John Scott and John O. Ward (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992), 266; “Dicitur quod Anglici sunt caudati. Set certe dicere possum quod Bernardus meus non Anglicus, set jam Anglicatus. Suam michi heri caudam patefecit, quam forte aliqui—quod absit—libenter abscidenter, si me ulterius decaudaret”: F. C. Hingeston-Randolph, ed., *The Register of John de Grandisson, Bishop of Exeter (A.D. 1327–1369)*, 3 vols. (London: George Bell and Sons, 1894–99), 1:303–34. The reference to the flatterer Vincent can be dated 1165, five years before the Becket incident.

¹⁴ Malcolm H. Jones, *The Secret Middle Ages* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), 66–67; Jones, “Saints and Other Horse-Mutilators, or Why All Englishmen Have Tails,” in *Fauna and Flora in the Middle Ages: Studies of the Medieval Environment and Its Impact on the Human Mind*, ed. Sieglinde Hartmann (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2007), 155–70.

¹⁵ Jones concludes, “With a careless disregard of chronology I have galloped across the millennia. We have come a very long way, both in time and space, from dark deeds in the prehistoric Indo-European pantheon to village mayhem in Jacobean Somerset, but I hope you will agree that there is a certain universality about the particular insult chronicled here, and one that had surprising and far-reaching resonance, for Englishmen in the Middle Ages in particular”: “Saints and Other Horse-Mutilators,” 168.

¹⁶ Ibid., 165–66; Cecil Meekings, Roy Hunnisett, and J. B. Post, eds., *Medieval Legal Records: Edited in Memory of C. A. F. Meekings* (London: H. M. Stationery Office, 1978), 158; R. E. Latham, *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, 14 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1981), s.vv. *curtare, decaudare, decurtare, excurtare*.

¹⁷ According to Maurice Keen, “even a lesser nobleman was expected . . . to keep hawks and hounds and to talk knowledgeably of them”: *Chivalry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 154. See also Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 28–33; David Salter, *Holy and Noble Beasts: Encounters with Animals in Medieval Literature* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2001), 8; Kristen M. Figg, “Froissart’s ‘Debate of the Horse and the Greyhound’: Companion Animals and Signs of Social Status in the Fourteenth Century,” in *Marvels, Monsters, and Miracles: Studies in the Medieval and Early Modern Imaginations*, ed. Timothy Jones and David Sprunger (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval

images of power, wealth, and manliness in the Middle Ages can be conjured than that of a mounted knight charging into battle or of a nobleman astride a magnificent steed, falcon at his wrist, leading a braying pack of hounds on the chase.¹⁸ Medieval people understood only too well the advantage that a man's mount gave him over nonequestrians; and when he rode by, they gave way hastily for both deference and necessity's sake. Jordanus Ruffus, for example, in *The Care of Horses* (ca. 1250), succinctly states how a man's status and reputation—his masculinity—are tied directly to his mount: "No animal is more noble than the horse, since it is by horses that princes, magnates and knights are separated from lesser people and because a lord cannot fittingly be seen among private citizens except through the mediation of a horse."¹⁹ Astride his horse, a man looked down upon his inferiors while gazing eye to eye with his peers.²⁰

That there was an emotive link between man and horse in the Middle Ages—and that horses symbolized masculine dominance and control and played a role in forging bonds of loyalty between men—can be shown through the evidence of medieval zoological and philosophical writings, chivalric chansons, art, and literature and is demonstrated also by the energy with which the breeding of fine horses was pursued by the Anglo-Normans. Modern equestrian studies help to inform our understandings not only of the physical and intellectual nature of these animals but also of the enduring bond, both past and present, that exists between humans and horses. By the eighth century it was taboo for Christians to eat horsemeat—unlike the flesh of other quadrupeds—unless under extreme circumstances (for example, during sieges).²¹ It is also important to note that, despite the fact that medieval and early-modern people were capable of committing heinous acts of violence against animals (for example, baiting bears and torturing cats), they were also capable of loving animals and behaving affectionately toward them.²²

Institute Publications, 2002), 85–86; Joyce E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 28.

¹⁸ David Crouch, *The Image of Aristocracy in Britain, 1000–1300* (London: Routledge, 1992), 305.

¹⁹ Cited in R. H. C. Davis, "The Medieval Warhorse," in *Horses in European Economic History: A Preliminary Counter*, ed. Francis M. L. Thompson (Reading: British Agricultural History Society, 1983), 4–20, at 19.

²⁰ Ann Hyland, *The Horse in the Middle Ages* (Stroud, UK: Sutton, 1999), 27; Hyland, *The Medieval Warhorse from Byzantium to the Crusades* (Stroud, UK: Sutton, 1996), xi, xii, 1–3. The horse was a real game changer between men in the Middle Ages. Consider, for example, Richard Malavel, a twelfth-century Scottish knight who, according to the chronicle account, "rode a very good horse, dealt heavy blows from the saddle, but when the warhorse was killed underneath him he was forced to surrender": Hyland, *The Medieval Warhorse*, 105.

²¹ François Sigaut, "La viande de cheval a-t-elle été interdite par l'église?" *Ethnozootechnie* 50 (1992): 85–91; Rob Meens, "Eating Animals in the Early Middle Ages: Classifying the Animal World and Building Group Identities," in *The Animal-Human Boundary: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Angela N. H. Creager and William Chester Jordan (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2002), 4–19; Salisbury, *The Beast Within*, 55–56.

²² Jeffrey Jerome Cohen addresses this apparent paradox in an excellent discussion on the bond between man and horse in the context of chivalry: "As the lapdogs of Chaucer's Prioress and the monk's trusty feline Pangur Ban in the Irish poem of the same name indicate, medieval people loved

Let us begin with an encyclopedic entry written by Bartholomew Anglicus, a thirteenth-century Scholastic, which succinctly captures medieval man's respect for—and special relationship with—the horse. Chansons and other medieval sources mirror many aspects of this particularly insightful description:

Horses be *joyful* in fields, and *smell* battles, and be *comforted* with noise of trumpets to battle and to fighting; and be *excited* to run with noise that they know, and be *sorry* when they be overcome, and *glad* when they have the mastery. And so *feeleth and knoweth their enemies* in battle so far forth that they a-rese on their enemies with biting and smiting, and also some *know their own lords, and forget mildness, if their lords be overcome*: and some horses *suffer no man to ride on their backs, but only their own lords*. And many horses *weep when their lords be dead*. And it is said that horses *weep for sorrow, right as a man doth, and so the kind of horse and of man is medlied*. Also oft men that shall fight take evidence and divine and guess what shall befall, *by sorrow or by the joy that the horse maketh*. Old men mean that in gentle horse, noble men take heed of four things, of shape, and of fairness, of willfulness, and of colour.²³

It is noteworthy that Bartholomew insists that horses have feelings, much like humans: they express joy, excitement, and sorrow; feel and know both master and enemy; and are devoted to the point of weeping for a dead lord, "right as a man doth," and, for this reason, man and steed are bound together, or "medlied." The horse, that unique beast capable of making a man "a centaur" (on which, more below), was undeniably his best friend in the animal kingdom.²⁴ Horses played such a prominent role in people's lives in the Middle Ages that members of the medieval scientific community even interpreted equestrian dreams in an almost Freudian manner. For example, a medieval Greek and Arabic treatise that was translated into Latin and made its way west in the eleventh century states that if someone dreamed of a docked horse or of one with a hairless tail, he would suffer from anxiety and lack of resources; if he dreamed of being astride a horse that had its tail cut off, he would soon lose his position in society.²⁵

these same animals with an ardor equal to that which today has encouraged the development of gourmet dog biscuits and Tiffany cat collars. Canines, felines, numerous species of birds, and domesticated squirrels were all cherished in the Middle Ages as pets. Even oxen, pigs, sheep and cows could be on terms familiar enough with their human caretakers to bear distinguishing names and often, especially in peasant households, to live under the same roof": *Medieval Identity Machines*, Medieval Cultures 35 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 35–77, at 47–48. The dual disregard and fondness for a packhorse is seen in a medieval miracle story. A retired knight, having been informed by his abbot that he can no longer fight with weapons, defends himself from robbers by ripping a leg off a packhorse and wielding it as a club. To quote Richard Kaeuper, "feeling pity for the packhorse after the fact, he replaces the leg and prays; the horse becomes whole again": *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 54.

²³ Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *Medieval Lore: An Epitome of the Science, Geography, Animal and Plant Folk-Lore and Myth of the Middle Age: Being Classified Gleanings from the Encyclopedia of Bartholomew Anglicus, On the Properties of Things*, ed. Robert Steele (London: Elliot Stock, 1893), 125–26, my emphasis.

²⁴ For more on this "sympathetic kinship with the animal" see Salter, *Holy and Noble Beasts*, 94.

²⁵ "Horses signify various people. If someone dreams that while seated on a steed, he was proceeding in an orderly fashion as the horse yielded to his commands, he will have honor and fame by analogy to the horse's beauty and obedience. If he dreams that this horse had a long and large shaggy

That medieval people believed that animals such as horses had sensory perception—like humans—is substantiated by medieval philosophical treatises. Latin authors located physical pain and pleasure in the sensory realm, which was also equated with emotions. Simo Knuuttila explains that “this was in line with the Aristotelian view that nature had provided all animals with the sense of touch in order to keep them away from what is harmful—pain immediately triggered avoidance.”²⁶ For instance, the fourteenth-century philosopher John Buridan writes: “Once one of the main organs is cut off, death quickly spreads through the whole body, just as animals with differing parts, which are more perfect than plants, once they are cut apart die more quickly than do the parts of a plant. For we clearly observe that *a horse both senses and suffers quite intensely* if it is stabbed either in the foot or in the ear, and so for its other parts [e.g., tail].”²⁷ Modern studies confirm that horses—like humans—do indeed feel pain and that their sense of touch is especially sensitive around the eyes, ears, and lips.²⁸

Chivalric literature contains numerous attestations of the strong bond between knight and horse.²⁹ A man’s horse, like his sword, was individualized and often received a name in early chansons.³⁰ Notably, several of the characteristics found in Bartholomew Anglicus’s encyclopedic entry on horses—their intense loyalty, their ability to communicate and to mourn a master’s death, their refusal to let any other man ride them—are mentioned also in the chansons de geste and other chivalric literature. Gervase of Tilbury paints an intimate portrait of the bond between man and mount in his early-thirteenth-century *Otia imperialia*. The

tail, he will have people clinging to his power in proportion to the size and length of the tail; and if the horse had two or more tails, the number of his followers will be even greater. If he dreams that this horse was dock-tailed or had a hairless tail, he will have anxiety and lack of resources by analogy to the loss of hairs. If a freedman and a ruler of people dreams that while mounted on a horse it happened that its long and shaggy-haired tail was cut off, he will shortly see [his position] cut short”: Steven M. Oberhelman, *The Oneirocriticon of Achmet: A Medieval Greek and Arabic Treatise on the Interpretation of Dreams* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1991), 156. This symbolism plays out in medieval literature; in the early-fourteenth-century tale *Sir Isumbra* the loss of Isumbra’s horse, hounds, and hawk not only reinforces his noble status but “foreshadow[s] and symbolize[s] all of the subsequent deprivations that he suffers”: Salter, *Holy and Noble Beasts*, 68.

²⁶ Simo Knuuttila, “George Pachymeres: Pain,” in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy: Philosophy between 500 and 1500*, ed. Henrik Lagerlund (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 909.

²⁷ As translated by Richard Bosley and Martin M. Tweedale, *Basic Issues in Medieval Philosophy: Selected Readings Presenting the Interactive Discourses among the Major Figures* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 1997), 780, my emphasis.

²⁸ Julie Whitaker, *The Horse: A Miscellany of Equine Knowledge* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2007), 115.

²⁹ Matthew Bennett concludes a study on the medieval warhorse by apologizing: “I do not wish to leave out the undoubtedly bond of affection formed between the rider and his mount. This is best expressed perhaps by the declaration found in several *chansons de geste* c. 1200. In them the hero states that if he had one foot in heaven and another on the back of his favourite warhorse he would give up his chance of eternal bliss and gallop away in this world!”: “The Medieval Warhorse Reconsidered,” in *Medieval Knighthood*, 5:19–40.

³⁰ Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe*, 173–74; Keen, *Chivalry*, 103. For example, in the *Song of Roland* we are given the names of five of the heroes’ horses, and, while not naming Archbishop Turpin’s horse, the author nevertheless calls attention to its “pure white tail” and “golden mane”: Salisbury, *The Beast Within*, 31.

Catalonian knight Guiraut de Cabreba was so close to his horse—the aptly named Bonus Amicus—that they were able to communicate through sign language; in this manner, Guiraut's good friend offered him “sound advice in any distress.” Bonus Amicus, loyal to the end, committed suicide following Guiraut’s murder “by dashing its neck against the wall.”³¹ Such devotion could be expressed reciprocally. Guillaume d’Orange, in the late-twelfth-century *Aliscans*, fears he will be killed or captured by Saracens and, even worse, his beloved horse, Baucent, taken: “If Paynims took you back to Spain with them / I’d die of grief, so help me God above!” Baucent “listens like a man” as Guillaume urges him to find the strength to carry them to safety; the horse joyfully obliges.³² Similarly, Marie de France relates how, after Sir Graelent is taken away to the land of faerie:

His destrier . . . grieved greatly for his master’s loss. He sought again the mighty forest, yet never was at rest by night or day. No peace might he find, but ever pawed he with his hoofs upon the ground, and neighed so loudly that the noise went through all the country round about. Many a man coveted so noble a steed, and sought to put bit and bridle in its mouth, yet never might one set hands upon him, for he would not suffer another master. So each year in its season the forest was filled with the cry and the trouble of this noble steed which might not find its lord.³³

It appears that such loyalty between horse and master was not just the stuff of medieval romance. According to the twelfth-century Muslim warrior and accomplished horseman Usamah, his father was hunting deer astride a black Arabian mare and was thrown after the horse tripped in a hunting pit. Notably the mare returned to watch over her rider until aid arrived. Another horse, however, a berdhun, shied from the danger, threw its rider, and took off.³⁴ Writing in the fifteenth century, Diaz de Gamez insists on a similar point: “Thus have horses been found that in the thick of battle have shown themselves as loyal to their masters as if they had been men.”³⁵ Modern equestrian studies confirm that horses are capable of expressing emotions as well as of recognizing and bonding closely with individual humans. The face, ears, and tail are the most expressive parts of a horse: for example, an anxious horse is “tight-mouthed”; an angry horse will pin its

³¹ Cited in Karl Steel, *How to Make a Human: Animals and Violence in the Middle Ages* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011), 223–24. The fourteenth-century French legal expert Honoré Bouvet confirms this bond: “A knight is bold, too, by reason of his horse in which he has complete trust”: as translated by Michael Prestwich, *Knight: The Medieval Warrior’s Unofficial Manual* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2010), 45.

³² Cited in Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 56.

³³ As translated by Eugene Mason, *The Lays of Marie de France* (London: Dent, 1911), 85. A story of the horse of Folcuin, a ninth-century bishop of Thérouanne, found in the *Deeds of the Abbots of Saint-Bertin* also celebrates this type of special bond between man and horse. Following the death of its master, the horse preceded Folcuin’s bier in the funeral procession, and “afterwards it refused to carry all men, nor, because of its great delight in the bishop, would it suffer the limb of any other man”: cited in Steel, *How to Make a Human*, 236–37. For other examples see Linda Kalof, *Looking at Animals in Human History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), 41.

³⁴ Hyland, *The Medieval Warhorse*, 164.

³⁵ Diaz de Gamez, “The Chivalric Ideal,” in *The Portable Medieval Reader*, ed. James Bruce Ross and Mary Martin McLaughlin (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1978), 91–92.

ears flat against its neck; and “an excited or aggressive horse will hold its tail up high, while a frightened one will put its tail flat between its legs, similar to a dog.”³⁶ This last characteristic means that a docked horse could appear to the medieval eye as one permanently afraid.

In medieval English art and literature the horse played two contrasting roles: as “the bearer of pilgrims” and as “a symbol of magnificence.”³⁷ In both roles, horse and rider are a reflection of one another, and their identity is intertwined: an equestrian’s masculinity, femininity, or effeminacy is reinforced via his or her mount. Consider three examples of this medieval “centaur phenomenon”³⁸ in the Anglo-Norman Bayeux Tapestry (ca. 1080), the anonymous poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ca. 1390), and Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1400). According to Joyce Salisbury: “The association between the power of the nobleman and the power of his horse can be seen in the figure of William the Conqueror’s horse in the Bayeux Tapestry. The horse is shown with an erection, demonstrating that it is a stallion. . . . In fact, man and his stallion were linked in a complex tie that metaphorically associated sexuality with power. In the tapestry, William’s power was expressed by his horse’s erection. The lines separating horse from man were very thin indeed.”³⁹ It is worth noting that William the Conqueror’s horse is also depicted as having a distinct mane, pointed ears, and full tail. As a symbol of its magnificence, the animal’s physical condition and appearance were of the utmost importance, for a handsome horse complemented its rider. Medieval people accordingly bred horses to have long tails and manes for the same reason that they valued long hair—that is, because these features were perceived as beautiful.⁴⁰ Consequently, when a majestic horse was described, its mane and tail were singled out to emphasize its excellence and virility. The *Gawain* poet introduces the Green Knight astride his magnificent stallion, likening the beast’s mane to its master’s hair and beard and calling attention to its well-groomed, showy tail:

³⁶ Whitaker, *The Horse*, 94–96. See also Fulvio Cinquini and Christine Shultz’s magnificently photographed *Man and Horse: An Enduring Bond* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2003), 15, 80, 161.

³⁷ Herbert James Hewitt, *The Horse in Medieval England* (London: J. A. Allen, 1983), 82.

³⁸ Charles Lamb employs this same term when describing the relationship between horse and rider in a letter he wrote to William Wordsworth on 22 January 1830: William J. Dawson and Coningsby Dawson, eds., *The Great English Letter Writers*, 2 vols. (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1908), 2:119.

³⁹ Salisbury, *The Beast Within*, 41. Notably, none of the horses’ tails are docked in the tapestry, though the hair is trimmed so it does not touch the ground: Hewitt, *The Horse in Medieval England*, 6.

⁴⁰ “Thus, as horses were bred for their noble function of warfare, they also were bred for distinctive characteristics that brought high status to their owners”: Salisbury, *The Beast Within*, 30–31. In the fourteenth century the Goodman of Paris tells his young bride that “a horse should have sixteen characteristics [but he provides eighteen]. That is, three qualities of a fox: short, upright ears; a good stiff coat; and a straight bushy tail; four of a hare: that is, a narrow head, great attentiveness, nimbleness, and speed; four of an ox: that is, wide, large, and broad *herpe* [chest]; a great belly; large protruding eyes; and low joints; three of an ass: good feet, a strong backbone, and gentleness; four of a maiden: a handsome mane, a beautiful chest, fine-looking loins, and large buttocks”: Gina L. Greco and Christine M. Rose, eds. and trans., *The Good Wife’s Guide: Le Ménagier de Paris, A Medieval Household Book* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 223–24.

The steed he bestrides of that same green so bright.
 A green horse great and thick;
 A headstrong steed of might;
 In broidered bridle quick,
 Mount matched man aright.
 Gay was this goodly man in guise all of green,
 And the hair of his head to his horse suited;
 Fair flowing tresses enfold his shoulders;
 A beard big as a bush on his breast hangs,
 That with his heavy hair, that from his head falls,
 Was evened all about above both his elbows,
 That half his arms thereunder were hid in the fashion
 Of a king's cap-a-dos, that covers his throat.
 The mane of that mighty horse much to it like,
 Well curled and becombed, and cunningly knotted
 With filaments of fine gold amid the fair green,
 Here a strand of the hair, here one of gold;
 His tail and his foretop twin in their hue,
 And bound both with a band of a bright green
 That was decked adown the dock with dazzling stones
 And tied tight at the top with a triple knot
 Where many bells well burnished range bright and clear.
 Such a mount in his might, nor man on him riding,
 None had seen, I dare swear, with sight in that hall so grand.⁴¹

The *Gawain* poet merges man and beast in his description of the Green Knight mounted upon his great, green horse. Similarly, in the prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* the pilgrims' horses mirror their masters' status and manliness. Pilgrims of stature command noble, expensive steeds, while their lesser companions ride ordinary beasts of burden, sometimes unsteadily. Among the well-to-do riders, the Knight's many "hors were goode," their master, conservatively dressed. The Monk, "a manly man," avid hunter, and owner of a full stable, rode to Canterbury on a palfrey "as broune as is a berye." The Merchant sported a forked beard, motley dress, and beaver hat, and "hye on horse he sat." On the other hand, the poor Oxford Clerk, his outer cloak threadbare, rode a horse "as leene . . . as is a rake." The Shipman, clad in a coarse woolen gown, had trouble straddling "a rounchy," or farmer's nag. The humbly dressed Plowman "rood upon a mere." The Reeve "sat upon a ful good stot [farm horse], that was al pomely grey and highte [called] Scot." Likewise, while the dainty Prioress and Nun demurely conveyed themselves sidesaddle, the domineering Wife of Bath confidently straddled her beast with "hir hipes large," wearing "on hir feet a paire of spores sharpe."⁴²

⁴¹ Marie Borroff, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Patience, and Pearl: Verse Translations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 19, lines 173–98.

⁴² Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 23–36 (prologue); Anthony Dent, *Chaucer and the Horse* (Leeds: Chorley and Pickersgill, 1959), 1–12.

As Chaucer's colorful description of the pilgrims and their mounts illustrates, by the late fourteenth century there were many different types of horses in England, a circumstance that was in large part due to the Norman Conquest of 1066. In preconquest England, horses had been more important than they were in Normandy between 946 and 1020; yet by William the Conqueror's generation this trend had been completely reversed, and in Normandy the Normans were devoting great time and effort to horse breeding, while the English lagged far behind.⁴³ In short, while the Anglo-Saxon records seem to value all horses as equal, the Norman sources always mention a horse's value, which could range from mere shillings for a cheap work horse to thirty and even forty pounds for a fine warhorse or palfrey.⁴⁴ To quote R. H. C. Davis, "there could be no clearer indication of the emphasis which the Normans put on improving the quality of their horse, and there can be no doubt that they succeeded."⁴⁵ The art of advanced horse breeding was imported to England—presumably along with the insult of tail docking—by the Normans in 1066.

In the Anglo-Norman world horse breeding was done by laymen and monks alike. The exchange of gifts of horses between influential men played an important role in this feudal society, both economically and socially.⁴⁶ Trading horses in confirmation of tithes and lands was often labeled as a gift, but both parties certainly knew "that what was being recorded was sales and purchases."⁴⁷ Consider a couple of examples of equestrian munificence involving churchmen. The bishop of Norwich, Herbert de Losinga (r. 1090–1119), wrote a letter to a bishop living in London, named Rodbert, thanking him for his gracious hospitality:

You loaded my pack-horses with so many good things to eat and drink, that, on my return, there was a sufficiency not for me only, but for my household. . . . But as to your palfrey, I have long thought what I should do with him, whether I should follow in regard to him the wish of your heart, or the bidding of your mouth? For in your heart you wished that I should keep the palfrey; with your mouth you bade me send him back. Pretending then not to hear the momentary bidding of your voice, I have discerned the secret intent of your heart, and have made up my mind to obey that. I have kept your palfrey; but the most righteous Judge will restore him to thee [one day]

⁴³ Also, King Cnut (r. 1016–35) was preoccupied with ruling Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Since the military was dependent on naval transport, the incentive to breed larger stallions would have seemed counterintuitive: R. H. C. Davis, "The Warhorses of the Normans," *Anglo-Norman Studies* 10 (1987): 67–82.

⁴⁴ According to Ann Hyland, during this period "a well-bred palfrey cost as much as a warhorse, sometimes considerably more": *The Medieval Warhorse*, 84.

⁴⁵ Davis, "The Warhorses of the Normans," 82. See also Charles Gladitz, *Horse Breeding in the Medieval World* (Dublin: Four Courts, 1997), 141–92.

⁴⁶ Davis explains, "It may seem strange that monasteries, especially those that were reformed and highly respected for their religious life, should make a business of horse breeding, but since monks wanted to live their lives in the remoteness of forests, as also did untamed horses, it was only natural for the one to look after the other": "The Warhorses of the Normans," 78.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 77–78. For other examples of such exchanges see R. H. C. Davis, *The Medieval Warhorse: Origin, Development and Redevelopment* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 55–58; Hyland, *The Medieval Warhorse*, 83–84; Walter Clifford Meller, *A Knight's Life in the Days of Chivalry* (London: T. W. Laurie, 1924), 30.

in a flowery plain, at that last great jubilee, when unto all men all that has been theirs shall be restored.⁴⁸

As Losinga makes clear, the horse was a tacit gift, a quid pro quo. Underlying the exchange is a bonding experience between two great men, in this particular case two bishops connecting with one another via a fine palfrey, which was the type of horse often ridden by women and clerics in medieval England.⁴⁹ Not all churchmen were comfortable playing this game, however. The reform-minded bishop of humble origins, Robert Grosseteste (r. 1235–53), expressed horror at simony and bribes of this sort. Henry Luard recounts how, following Grosseteste's promotion to the see of Lincoln, when there was a dire shortage of horses, the bishop was approached by his steward, who told him that a couple of Cistercian monks had arrived and wished to give him two beautiful palfreys as a gift. Refusing to see either monks or horses, Grosseteste exclaimed: "Were I to take them, they would drag me down by their tails to hell."⁵⁰

By the twelfth century there were numerous types of horses employed in nearly every aspect of life in England. The four primary classes of horses were military, hunting, riding, and agricultural.⁵¹ Knights rode warhorses (usually stallions), also called destriers or chargers, into battle. Coursers were similarly used in fighting and hunting. When traveling, however, palfreys or trotter horses were common choices for men and women alike. Moreover, bred mules, also called palfreys or jennets, were intended for women and clerics to ride. Rouncies, also called hakens, were standard horses with no special breeding and could be used for both riding and labor. Finally, sumpters and cart horses were used for transport and agricultural purposes.⁵² Besides warhorses and palfreys, whose tails were presumably targeted when violence was committed between knights, the equestrian victims of malevolent tail docking varied from fine riding horses to lowly farm horses. In spite of this violence, in the Middle Ages domesticated animals—which were essential to survival and prosperity alike—were generally well cared for.⁵³ In the

⁴⁸ Herbert de Losinga, *The Life, Letters, and Sermons of Bishop Herbert de Losinga* (B. circ. A.D. 1050, D. 1119), ed. Edward M. Goulburn and Henry Symonds, 2 vols. (Oxford: Parker, 1878), 1:128–29.

⁴⁹ Hewitt, *The Horse in Medieval England*, 2. For a wonderful description of palfreys see Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec and Enide*, ed. Ruth Harwood Cline (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 41–42, lines 1367–1402.

⁵⁰ Robert Grosseteste, *Roberti Grosseteste episcopi quondam Lincolnensis epistolae*, ed. Henry Richards Luard, Rolls Series 25 (London: Longmans, 1861), lxxxix.

⁵¹ Salisbury, *The Beast Within*, 35.

⁵² Hewitt, *The Horse in Medieval England*, 1–9; Christopher Gravett, *Knight: Noble Warrior of England, 1200–1600* (New York: Osprey, 2008), 121. Also see John Langdon, *Horses, Oxen and Technological Innovation: The Use of Draught Animals in English Farming from 1066 to 1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Langdon, "A Quiet Revolution: The Horse in Agriculture," *History Today* 39 (1989): 32–37; Langdon, "Horse Hauling: A Revolution in Vehicle Transport in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century England?" *Past and Present* 103 (1984): 37–66; Langdon, "The Economics of Horses and Oxen in Medieval England," *Agricultural History Review* 30 (1982): 31–40.

⁵³ "Ratios of humans to animals show domestic animals to have been a significant presence in people's lives. . . . Cattle and horses served the property functions of both labor and materials,

evidence both from everyday life and from the literature of the Middle Ages, then, possessing and commanding a horse provided its owner or rider with a status that was measured by the physique, condition, and value of the animal itself. For medieval people, like their modern equivalents, human dominion over animals “was expressed in a complex of related ideas that included ownership, mastery and control.”⁵⁴ That the Green Knight’s horse was so fierce and striking—yet obedient—only served to augment the knight’s own standing as beast master, for despite being “a headstrong steed of might,” the “mount matched man aright.”⁵⁵ In sum, a man’s power, potency, and character—his masculinity—were associated directly with that of his horse. Attacking another man’s horse thereby constituted violence directed at the animal’s rider or owner as much as at the living, feeling, property itself.⁵⁶ But why specifically target the horse’s tail?

EQUESTRIAN TAIL MUTILATION IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Tail docking of horses has been practiced for millennia as a means of shaming and enfeebling an adversary; it was also employed during ritual sacrifice. While the earliest reference to excising an animal’s tail is found in the Code of Hammurabi (ca. 1750 BCE), it seems that such penalties were directed more at the functionality of the beast than at some perceived insult.⁵⁷ The ancient Greeks, on the other hand, were apparently well attuned to the insult of cutting off the tails and manes of an enemy’s horses and humiliating him in a grand public performance.⁵⁸ The Romans also employed tail docking, but during sacrifices. When the October Horse was sacrificed, for instance, it was decapitated, and the

making them the most highly valued animals in the villages”: Salisbury, *The Beast Within*, 24. There is even evidence that there was specialization among the grooms caring for horses in medieval households. In the household of Thomas Arundel, bishop of Ely, there were eight or nine pages: one was responsible for the palfreys, another for the hackneys, and the rest took care of the larder, laundry, and doorkeeping. Likewise, another English household in ca. 1296–97 retained twelve grooms for thirty-one horses. Hosts were expected to care for a guest’s horses and hunting dogs during visits: C. M. Woolgar, *The Great Household in Late Medieval England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 25, 40, 53, 190, 193.

⁵⁴ Salisbury, *The Beast Within*, 16–18.

⁵⁵ Borroff, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 19, lines 176–78. Perhaps the modern equivalent would be a man walking with a pair of menacing—yet obedient—pit bulls.

⁵⁶ John E. Archer, *By a Flash and a Scare: Arson, Animal Maiming, and Poaching in East Anglia, 1815–1870* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 199; Timothy Shakesheff, *Rural Conflict, Crime and Protest: Herefordshire, 1800–1860* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2003), 176–200, esp. 198.

⁵⁷ Chilperic Edwards, trans., *The Hammurabi Code and the Sinaitic Legislation* (London: Watts, 1904), 67–68.

⁵⁸ Plutarch (ca. 45–120 CE), when discussing the conquests of the Syracusans against the Athenians in the fifth century BCE, describes how they decorated trees with the Athenians’ arms and then “crowned themselves with wreaths and decked out their own horses superbly, while they cropped the manes and tails of their enemies’ mounts and then marched in procession into the city”: *The Rise and Fall of Athens: Nine Greek Lives*, trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1960), 241.

inhabitants of the Subura and the Sacra Via fought over its head, while its tail was whisked away from the Field of Mars and brought to the Regia, where it was supposed to drip blood upon the hearth as part of a divine service.⁵⁹ According to Walter Burkert, “we may suspect that the tail represented the genital organ, and our suspicions are raised to the level of probability by the fact that a horse’s tail has too little blood to be of use in the ceremony.”⁶⁰

By 1000 CE, in western Europe, Scandinavia, and Celtic Britain, people held horses in high esteem and assigned symbolic significance to their manes, ears, and particularly their tails. This development is apparent in early-medieval law codes, which—as opposed to Roman law—treated tail mutilation as property damage.⁶¹ Unlike Roman law, Germanic, Scandinavian, and Welsh law specifically penalized tail mutilation, or docking, and often made the distinction between the docking of horses and of “cattle.”⁶² Welsh law (ca. 950), for example, stipulates that one who cut off the hairs of a horse’s tail must pay a fine or—notably—“put the horse in a place where it will not be seen . . . and give the owner another horse to do what it would do, until the tail hair of his own horse is as it formerly was at its best.”⁶³ After all, these tribesmen loved their horses: Clovis’s father, Childeric, was entombed with the head of his warhorse. The Franks also had an elaborate organization of estates for horse breeding;⁶⁴ the value placed on horses by the Burgundians is shown by their practice of including Franks among their own horsemen.⁶⁵ The Visigoths were also expert equestrians.⁶⁶ So, too, were the Lombards and Alamans, the latter of whom provided the Roman army with cavalry.⁶⁷ Horses were venerated in Scandinavian sagas and in Norse

⁵⁹ C. Bennett Pascal, “October Horse,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 85 (1981): 61–91; Harry Hubbell, “Horse Sacrifice in Antiquity,” *Yale Classical Studies* 1 (1928): 181–92.

⁶⁰ Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 68–69. Greater attention will be paid to the connection between a horse’s tail and a man’s penis below.

⁶¹ Lex Aquilia 1, as cited by Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, “From Sacrifices to Symbols: Animals in Late Antiquity and Early Christianity,” in Celia Deane-Drummond et al., eds., *Animals as Religious Subjects: Transdisciplinary Perspectives* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 149–66, at 151.

⁶² Katherine Fischer Drew, *Laws of the Salian Franks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 99–101; MGH LL nat. Germ., ed. Georg H. Pertz, 6 vols. (repr. Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1965), 3:317, 613; Samuel P. Scott, *The Visigothic Code* (Boston: Boston Book, 1910), 283–86; Katherine Fischer Drew, *The Lombard Laws* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1973), 117–18; Theodore Rivers, *Laws of the Alamans and Bavarians* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977), 91; Laurence M. Larson, *The Earliest Norwegian Laws: Being the Gulathing Law and the Frostathing Law* (Clark, NJ: Lawbook Exchange, 2008), 360, no. 46: “If a Man Maims a Horse”; Dafydd Jenkins, “The Horse in Welsh Law Texts,” in *The Horse in Celtic Culture: Medieval Welsh Perspectives*, ed. Sioned Davies and Neris Ann Jones (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), 64–81, esp. 73–76.

⁶³ Dafydd Jenkins, ed. and trans., *The Law of Hywel Dda: Law Texts from Medieval Wales* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1990), 172–74.

⁶⁴ Bernard Bachrach, *Merovingian Military Organization, 481–751* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1972), 136–37.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶⁶ Herwig Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, trans. Thomas J. Dunlap (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 167–68.

⁶⁷ Bachrach, *Merovingian Military Organization*, 14, 39, 118.

mythology.⁶⁸ Finally, the Welsh—who traded horses with the Irish—also had a tradition of honoring and protecting them.⁶⁹

It makes sense, therefore, that potentially the earliest—yet impossible to date—medieval literary references to malevolent tail docking are found in Scandinavian and Celtic British sources. For example, in *Hrolf's Saga*—written in Iceland in the fourteenth century but recording events from the sixth century—King Hrolf and his party rode to King Adil's hall, spurring their horses at the last minute and scattering Adil's men in front of them. Hrolf's party then instructed Adil's men to take special care of their horses' manes and tails, while they—each carrying a hawk—headed out to hunt, which was “a very grand thing to do in those days.” In response to this perceived insult, Adil ordered his minions to mutilate Hrolf's horses by cutting off their manes and tails: “Treat them in all ways with as much ridicule as you can. Just leave them barely alive.”⁷⁰ Similar examples of mutilating horses for the purposes of vengeance and shaming are found in the Welsh *Life of Saint Cadog* (recorded ca. 1080 but discussing a sixth-century saint),⁷¹ the Icelandic *Skjoldunga Saga* (recorded in the twelfth century but with similarities to *Beowulf*),⁷² and the celebrated Welsh *Mabinogion* (recorded in the early thirteenth century but harking back to a mythical Arthurian past).⁷³

As for England, the role that horses played in warfare among the Anglo-Saxons is hotly debated. While there is considerable evidence that Anglo-Saxons used horses in agriculture and transport, they did not uniformly use them as cavalry, like the Normans. Nevertheless, horses and harnesses denoted status among the English nobility.⁷⁴ Yet scholars are perplexed as to why no Anglo-Saxon dooms (laws) exist regarding the maltreatment of horses generally and in particular the mutilation of their tails, ears, and manes.⁷⁵

⁶⁸ Paul Belloni du Chaillu, *The Viking Age: The Early History, Manners, and Customs of the English-Speaking Nations*, 2 vols. (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1889), 1:285–93; Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, trans. Arthur Brodeur (New York: American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1916), 55–56; Bertha Phillpotts, *The Elder Edda and Ancient Scandinavian Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), 171; Stephen O. Glosecki, “Moveable Beasts: The Manifold Implications of Early Germanic Animal Imagery,” in *Animals in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*, ed. Nona C. Flores, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities 1716 (New York: Garland, 1996), 3–23.

⁶⁹ Jenkins, *The Law of Hywel Dda*, 172–74; Jenkins, “The Horse in Welsh Law Texts,” 64–81.

⁷⁰ Jesse L. Byock, *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 58.

⁷¹ Arthur W. Wade-Evans, *Vitae sanctorum Britanniae et genealogiae* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press Board, 1944), 59.

⁷² Bjarni Guðnason, *Danakonunga sögur*, Íslensk Fornrit 35 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1982), 31–32.

⁷³ Jeffrey Gantz, *The Mabinogion* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 69.

⁷⁴ For more on this debate see Matthew Strickland, ed., *Anglo-Norman Warfare: Studies in Late Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman Military Organization and Warfare* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 1992), xx–xxii. The heroic resister to the Norman invasion, Hereward the Wake, hopelessly besieged in battle, desperately slew his horse with his own hands “so that no lesser man should boast that he had got Hereward's horse”: as translated by Michael Swanton, “The Deeds of Hereward,” in *Medieval Outlaws: Twelve Tales in Modern English Translation*, ed. Thomas H. Ohlgren (West Lafayette, IN: Parlor, 2005), 28–99, at 82.

⁷⁵ Malcolm Jones also finds it striking that “such specific attention to attacks on horses seems to be missing from the Anglo-Saxon legal codes as they have come down to us”: “Saints and Other Horse-Mutilators,” 159. William Youatt claims that, soon after the time of Alfred the Great (r. 871–99), “it

What is possibly the earliest datable incident of malevolent tail docking in England reportedly occurred in 1071, during a dispute between Croyland Abbey and a powerful Norman lord named Ivo Taillebois, who had arrived in 1066 with William the Conqueror.⁷⁶ Taillebois used dogs to round up the abbey's livestock and then drowned them, broke their legs, or cut off their tails and ears.⁷⁷ The purpose was apparently to destroy the use or profitability of the animals, to shame their monastic owners, and to terrify the abbey into submission. Ann Hyland believes that Taillebois's docking rampage is the earliest of its kind in medieval England, stating that "a tangential look at the ear and tail mutilation reveals that in much of the later-medieval era, and for many centuries thereafter, it was the disgusting and cruel fashion to crop the ears and dock the tails of some horses. From the Croyland chronicler's text it would appear that the customs were unknown in England until after the Norman usurpation."⁷⁸ Although Hyland does not cite any examples of this trend, she may have been referring to cases like one from 1363, in which William de Wenden accused Thomas Ferrer of neglecting his steed after he had brought it to Thomas "to dock the tail of the same horse in the modern fashion. And the same Thomas properly docked the tail of the horse in accordance with what belongs to his art and burned it and allowed the said horse to go away from him."⁷⁹

was decreed that he who cut off the hair from a horse's tail was to maintain him until it was grown again, and in the meantime to furnish the owner with another horse," but he provides no citation; he may have been referring to Welsh law (ca. 950), discussed above, n. 63: *The Horse: Its Breeds, Management and Diseases* (London: R. Baldwin, 1857), 55.

⁷⁶ The Croyland Chronicle was written after 1071, and some of its authenticity is doubtful. Still, David Roffe believes that the work should not be entirely dismissed: "The *Historia Croylandensis*: A Plea for Reassessment," *English Historical Review* 110 (1995): 93–108.

⁷⁷ Ingulf, *Chronicle of the Abbey of Croyland*, ed. Henry T. Riley (London: Bohn, 1893), 143.

⁷⁸ Hyland, *The Horse in the Middle Ages*, 32. However, there is evidence that pagan customs of horse mutilation lived on in parts of England well into the eighth century. In the Synod of Celchyth or Chelsea, in 787, messengers arrived from Rome to renew bonds of faith with the Anglo-Saxons and to condemn such practices: "From the influence of a vile and unbecoming custom, you deform and mutilate your horses. You slit their nostrils, tie their ears together, and, by doing so, make them deaf: besides this, you cut off their tails; and, when you may enjoy them uninjured and perfect, you choose rather to maim and blemish them, so as to make them odious and disgusting objects to all who see them. Numbers of you likewise are accustomed to eat your horses; a practice of which no Christians in the East were ever guilty. This also you are hereby admonished to renounce entirely": as translated by Richard Berenger, *The History and Art of Horsemanship*, 2 vols. (London: Davies and Cadell, 1771), 1:240; for the original text see Arthur West Haddan and William Stubbs, *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents Relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1869–78), 3:458.

⁷⁹ As translated by Morris Arnold, ed., *Select Cases of Trespass from the King's Courts, 1307–1399*, Publications of the Selden Society 100, 103 (London: Selden Society, 1985–87), 2:261, who also provides the original text: "Et dicit quod predictus Wilelmus predictis die et anno venit ad ipsum Thomam apud Chelmersford ducens secum predictum equum unde queritur etc. et supplicavit eidem Thome ut caudam ejusdem equi more tunc current amputaret, et idem Thomas prout pertinent officio suo caudam equi illius decenter amputavit atque ardebat et dictum equum de eo abire permisit." It has been argued that the fashion of docking horses, in the same way that people dock Doberman pinschers today, took off in the fifteenth century: George Fleming, "The Wanton Mutilation of Animals," *Twentieth Century* 37 (1895): 440–61, at 450.

It would make sense if it were the Normans who had imported malevolent tail docking into England, for it resembles other forms of violent shaming employed in their culture. While “virtually unknown” in Anglo-Saxon England, France, and Germany, castration and blinding were utilized in the Scandinavian north as a form of emasculating punishment.⁸⁰ According to Klaus van Eickels, to the Normans, the opposite of manhood was effeminacy, not femininity; Normans identified their masculine selves, not in opposition to women, but against “unmanly” male rivals.⁸¹ Defacing or emasculating an enemy’s body was not only an effective means of destroying a nobleman’s political ambitions but castration and blindness were also inflicted upon commoners for serious crimes. Subsequently, such physical castigation “constituted a constantly renewed frame of reference for the close coupling of lordship and masculinity.”⁸² Some of these ferocious Norsemen settled in northern France, or Normandy, during the tenth century, conquered England in the eleventh, and brought their laws, customs, and violent shaming rituals—like malevolent tail docking—with them.⁸³

The Norman origins of this form of equestrian mutilation may also help to explain why medieval people seem to have interpreted the debasing act as a kind of violent emasculation—or figurative castration—of the horse’s owner or rider, although the connection between an animal’s tail and a man’s penis stems back at least to the late Roman Republic and does seem to have a rather universal appeal.⁸⁴ The Norman and medieval French variations of *cauda*—*coe* or *queue*—can also mean “penis,” but whether this “reflects a Latin usage or is a French innovation is open to question.”⁸⁵ In Middle English, too, the word *tail* (from

⁸⁰ Van Eickels, “Gendered Violence,” 594.

⁸¹ Ibid., 590.

⁸² Ibid., 591, 597. “In the eyes of Norman warriors, bodies definitely did matter. Slanderous rivals and enemies as ‘effeminate’ commonly comprised underscoring the shame inflicted by depicting or even visualising it as a loss of manhood embodied”: *ibid.*, 591.

⁸³ For example, the practice of trial by combat was imported to England by the Normans: George Neilson, *Trial by Combat* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1890), 31–32.

⁸⁴ The Roman poet Horace (65–8 BCE) used the word “tail” (*cauda*) to mean “penis”: James Noel Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 36–37.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*; Ellen L. Friedrich, “When a Rose Is Not a Rose: Homoerotic Emblems in the *Roman de la rose*,” in *Gender Transgressions: Crossing the Normative Barrier in Old French Literature*, ed. Karen J. Taylor, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities 2064 (New York: Garland, 1998), 21–44, esp. 28–29; Alan Hindley, *Old French–English Dictionary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 131. In the thirteenth-century chanson *Aymeri de Narbonee* we are told that the Germans “tel I ot ive a quee recopée” (line 1631): *Betrand de Bar-sur-Aube, Aymeri de Narbonne, chanson de geste*, ed. Louis Demaison (Paris: F. Didot, 1887), 70. Over a century ago—when horses were still the dominant form of transportation—Wilson Drane Crabb noted in his doctoral thesis at the University of Chicago that this “reference to the custom of bobbing the horses’ tails (cf. 1631) is very interesting. The messengers of Aymeri meet Savari and his men upon a mission similar to their own. The Germans are described as very awkward, grotesque, and as bad riders. It is to be noted that these Germans—not the French—are represented as having their mares’ tails bobbed. Thus the customs [*sic*] which, with the elite of our large cities, has become so prevalent was in use as early as the thirteenth century; but it is mentioned by way of ridicule”: *Culture History in the Chanson de geste: Aymeri de Narbonne* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1898), 7, my emphasis.

Old English *taegel*) can mean “penis.”⁸⁶ Finally, in the *Catholicon Anglicum* (1483), the Latin definition provided for the word *tayle* is “*cauda, penis equi est.*”⁸⁷ The association had real staying power, for the phallic symbolism of an animal’s tail continued well into Elizabethan and Stuart England and has only recently changed.⁸⁸

There is another possible dimension to the grave insult, one stemming from the medieval Norse tradition of belittling an opponent by accusing him of bestiality. While this convention was only written down in the thirteenth century, it stems from older customs. Moreover, Norwegian law was late in banning bestiality, and laws decrying it were included only after the introduction of Christianity in the eleventh century. The proscribed penalty was, not surprisingly, castration and outlawry.⁸⁹ In her informative discussion on animal sexuality and shifting ideas toward bestiality, Joyce Salisbury calls our attention to two provocative examples of the Scandinavian insult. First, in *Njal’s Saga* Skarp-Hedin accused Thorkel of performing anilingus upon a mare, saying, “you would be better employed picking out of your teeth the bits of mare’s arse you ate before you came here—your shepherd saw you at it, and was amazed at such disgusting behavior.” More provocative still is the insult thrown in *Ale-Hood*: “You didn’t notice the fat stallion that Steingrim had till it was up your back-side. That skinny mare you were on faltered under you, . . . and I’ve never been able to make up my mind whether it was you or the mare that got it. Everybody could see how long you were stuck there, the stallion’s legs had got such a grip on your cloak.”⁹⁰ In sum, by docking a man’s horse, the assailant might figuratively “castrate” his human opponent to make him appear to be permanently afraid and ever vulnerable to being mounted by a real male—a stallion—not a “gelding” like himself.

Finally, the fact that a horse’s ears were sometimes mutilated along with its tail during such ritualized defacements only reinforces the connection between tail and penis, for medieval people believed that a man’s generative powers were dependent in part upon his ears (for loading sperm from the head to the testicles).⁹¹ This idea is a primary reason why a criminal’s ears were severed in the Middle Ages to convey infamy. To quote Esther Cohen: “With these severed, a man lost his power of procreation. . . . Physical marking and mutilation thus served two functions. The pain they caused was both purifying and retributive, but the long-term result was to set the criminal apart from society for life and

⁸⁶ Robert E. Lewis, ed., *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. *T* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 18.

⁸⁷ Sidney J. H. Herrtage, *Catholicon Anglicum: An English-Latin Wordbook, Dated 1483*, EETS OS 75 (London: N. Trübner, 1882), 377.

⁸⁸ Gordon Williams, *A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature*, 3 vols. (London: Athlone, 1994), 3:1357–58. Currently men “chase tail.”

⁸⁹ Salisbury, *The Beast Within*, 93–95.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 94–95.

⁹¹ Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset, *Sexualité et savoir médical au moyen âge* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1985), 46 n. 2; Esther Cohen, *The Crossroads of Justice: Law and Culture in Late Medieval France*, Brill’s Studies in Intellectual History 36 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 168 n. 16.

presumably sterilize him as well. Marking was a life-sentence of semi-outlawry, certainly of marginality.”⁹² Similarly, the connection between shame, mutilation, and a man’s prized—masculine—animal is manifest in a law, preserved by the English jurist Henry Bracton, detailing the penalty for rape; not only would the rapist incur “the loss of his life and members . . . [but] by the law of the Romans, the Franks and the English, even his horse shall to his ignominy be put to shame upon its scrotum and its tail, which shall be cut off as close as possible to the buttocks. If he has a dog with him, . . . it shall be put to shame in the same way; if a hawk, let it lose its beak, its claws and its tail.”⁹³

It appears, then, that maliciously docking an adversary’s horse in the Middle Ages conveyed infamy upon its owner or rider and emasculated him in the eyes of his equestrian peers. By removing a phallic-like extension of the horse, the aggressor rendered the beast’s master symbolically less powerful and publicly deprived him of reputation. Perhaps Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) put it best when he stated: “Vengeance is wrought on dumb animals and any other irrational creatures, because in this way their owners are punished.”⁹⁴

KNIGHTS, CHIVALRY, AND “TAILED” DEFAMATION

Medieval knights employed malevolent tail docking not only against ecclesiastical targets in England (as will be shown below) but against other knights throughout Europe. A horse whose tail had been forcibly excised was a sight common enough to be represented in heraldry. In French blazon, the term *diffamé*, or “defamed,” was used to denote an animal whose tail had been cut off. It means, literally, “to be deprived of reputation”—*de fama* (see Fig. 1, number 65).⁹⁵ Thus, in mid-thirteenth-century Spain, if a foot soldier dallied on his way to battle, he was scalped as punishment, whereas a knight guilty of the same crime suffered defamation through his horse’s mutilation, which, in most cases, involved cutting off its tail. As a result, the Alfonsine codes authorized any knight whose horse had lost its tail in combat to get a replacement horse so as to avoid “the recriminating stares of his fellow warriors,” who might not know the full story.⁹⁶ For

⁹² Cohen, *The Crossroads of Justice*, 168.

⁹³ Henry de Bracton, *On the Laws and Customs of England*, trans. Samuel E. Thorne, 4 vols. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968), as cited in Salisbury, *The Beast Within*, 40. Perhaps the phallic association with a noble bird’s beak helps explain why, in 1291, “John de Wellyngton and others unknown in his fellowship took the swans of John le Bygod, knight, swimming from the river near Beccles to the pond (*foveam*) of Roger de Wellyngton, and amputated their beaks, and afterwards threw them into the pond and let them go”: *Calendar of Inquisitions Miscellaneous (Chancery): A.D. 1219–1307* (London: H. M. Stationery Office, 1916), 454, no. 1617.

⁹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, as cited in Daniel Lord Smail and Kelly Gibson, *Vengeance in Medieval Europe: A Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 208.

⁹⁵ <http://www.heraldica.org/topics/abatemt.htm>; <http://www.heraldryclipart.com/heraldry-diction ary.html>; Thomas Robson, *The British Herald; or, Cabinet of Armorial Bearings of the Nobility and Gentry of Great Britain and Ireland*, 3 vols. (Sunderland, UK: Turner and Marwood, 1830), vol. 3, “*diffamé*,” and see Fig. 1.

⁹⁶ J. F. Powers, *A Society Organized for War: The Iberian Municipal Militias in the Central Middle Ages, 1000–1284* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 199–200; Andrew Ayton, *Knights*



Engraved for THE BRITISH HERALD, Pub. by T. Robson, 52, Nile St.

Fig. 1. Image of a lion *diffamé* from Thomas Robson, *The British Herald* (Sunderland, UK: Turner & Marwood, 1830), vol. 3, plate 14, number 65.
(Photo: Author)

this reason, medieval warhorses often fought with their tails enclosed under the cloth caparison.⁹⁷ In the same way, people in medieval England who had lost an ear through some misfortune sought acknowledgment from the king that their mutilation was accidental and not the mark of infamy denoting a criminal.⁹⁸ While

and Warhorses: Military Service and the English Aristocracy under Edward III (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 1994), 74–75. Restor, or the replacement of horses lost during military service, was common in medieval England: “If a horse was killed, the presentation of ears and tail to the royal clerks then resulted in action. Some were given back to the royal caravan because they were deemed no longer fit (one sorry steed ended up as a royal carthorse)”: Christopher Gravett, *English Medieval Knight, 1200–1300* (Oxford: Osprey, 2002), 15.

⁹⁷ Gravett, *English Medieval Knight*, 60.

⁹⁸ See, for example, the entries of 17 December 1252: “Testification that Walter son of Roger de Sumery lost his left ear by some evildoer in the forest of Clarendon and not on account of any felony,” and 30 October 1257: “Testification, lest any damage or disgrace arise, that Hugh de Eynesham lost his right ear when the king was last in Gascony in a fight between the king’s people and his enemies at Castel-Jaloux in Gascony, and not by any other cause”: *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1247–1258*, 167, 603; dozens of other examples can be found by searching “lost” and “ear” in the *Calendar of Patent Rolls*. Here and below all references to the *Calendar of Patent Rolls* are taken from the online version created by G. R. Boynton and the University of Iowa Libraries: <http://sdrc.lib.uiowa.edu>

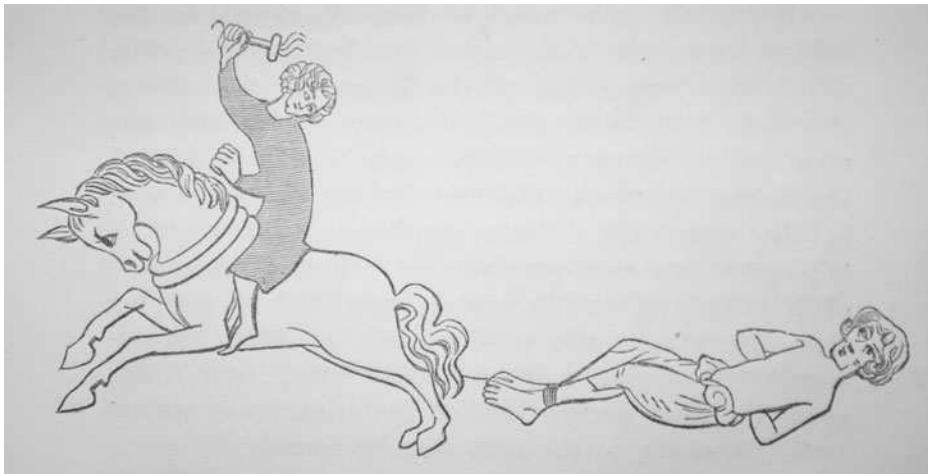


Fig. 2. Image of a criminal being dragged to his execution, from the fourteenth-century *Chronicon Roffense*. Reproduced in Johannes de Oxenedes, *Chronica Johannis de Oxenedes*, ed. Henry Ellis (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, & Roberts, 1859), xxxi.

(Photo: Ian Petchenik)

it would be rash to argue that the defamation resulting from a knight's docking a fellow equestrian's horse stemmed directly from developments in medieval canon law, it is nevertheless informative that Gratian's *Decretum* (ca. 1140) includes among the groups of people who experience "dishonor in fact (*infamia facti*)" those who had fled from battle.⁹⁹ Consider a humorous story told by Ralph of Caen—a Norman clerk born to a knightly family—concerning the patriarch of Antioch, Bernard, fleeing the Battle of Harran on 7 May 1104. The roads were muddy, and Patriarch Bernard was having difficulty keeping up on his mud-soaked mule because its tail was dragging behind. He implored the crusaders around him: "'Cut it off, I say. I shall not blush, while in this storm, to press the back of this animal after it has been cut free and lightened. . . . Just as God cuts away your sins, I absolve everything from those who cut it away.' Many passed with closed ears, for a blind fear closed them, . . . [but] one fellow . . . accepted this remedy in exchange for the aforementioned remission [of sins]. Thus, two matters were absolved with one act. The soldier was absolved of his sins, and

/patentrolls/search.html. (I would like to thank Professor Boynton and the University of Iowa Libraries for making this invaluable collection of historical documents so accessible.) Such disfigurement could even be earned by harming a horse; during Edward I's campaign against the Welsh in 1277, a general named John de Monte Alto cut off Robert Roket's ear "because Robert killed a horse in the king's army, and for no other reason": *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1272–1281*, 278.

⁹⁹ Edward Peters, "Wounded Names: The Medieval Doctrine of Infamy," in *Law in Mediaeval Life and Thought*, ed. Edward B. King and Susan J. Ridyard (Sewanee, TN: Press of the University of the South, 1990), 68–69.

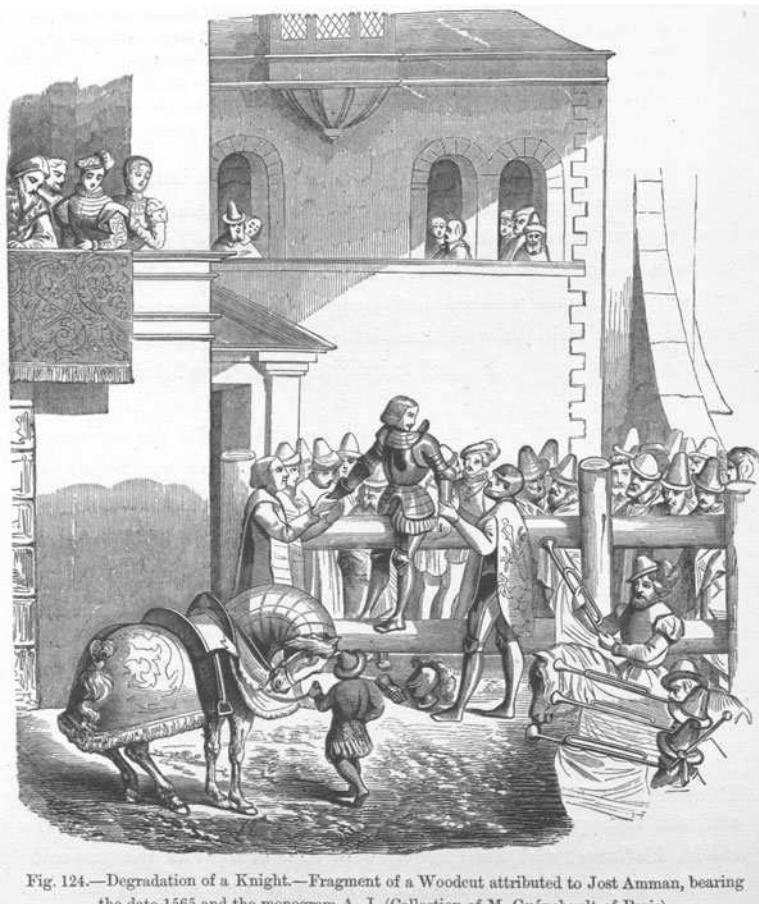


Fig. 124.—Degradation of a Knight.—Fragment of a Woodcut attributed to Jost Amman, bearing the date 1565 and the monogram A. J. (Collection of M. Guénebault of Paris).

Fig. 3. Image of the degradation of a knight, ca. 1565, from P. L. Jacob [Paul Lacroix], *Military and Religious Life in the Middle Ages and at the Period of the Renaissance* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1874), 154.
 (Photo: courtesy of DePaul University Library)

the beast was absolved of its burden.”¹⁰⁰ It is significant that Patriarch Bernard felt the need to justify his being seen fleeing battle upon a docked—that is, defamed—mule in the midst of Norman knightly company, for in medieval heraldry an animal depicted with its tail between its legs is “tailed”—a coward (*coart*) (see Fig. 1, number 53).¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ As translated in Radulfus Cadomensis, *The “Gesta Tancredi” of Ralph of Caen: A History of the Normans on the First Crusade*, trans. Bernard S. Bachrach, Crusade Texts in Translation 12 (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2010), 167. See also J. F. Verbruggen, *The Art of Warfare in Western Europe during the Middle Ages: From the Eighth Century to 1340* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2002), 44–45.

¹⁰¹ Hindley, *Old French-English Dictionary*, 130–31; <http://www.heraldryclipart.com/heraldry-dictionary.html>; Robson, *The British Herald*, 3, s.v. “coward” (as shown above in Fig. 1).

To medieval knights the “safeguarding of reputation” was paramount.¹⁰² A knight sometimes shamed his vanquished opponent by displaying the latter’s armor, reversed, at his horse’s tail or by hanging his opponent’s heraldry emblem there until his opponent paid the ransom owed—a practice known in French sources as *deshonoirement*.¹⁰³ According to Maurice Keen, this act “implied a reproach that would be *universal* in knightly company.”¹⁰⁴ Dragging anything, for that matter, at a horse’s tail in the Middle Ages—in the way that criminals were dragged on their way to execution—was considered to be highly debasing, especially for a knight (Fig. 2).¹⁰⁵ This symbolism helps to explain why, when Thomas Becket’s body was barely cold, Robert de Broc returned to the cathedral and threatened the monks of Canterbury that, should they not bury the archbishop immediately, he would tie the corpse to his horse, tow it around town, and deposit the mutilated remains either in a gibbet or upon a dunghill.¹⁰⁶

For a knight to cut off the tail of another knight’s horse in the course of an argument over lands and ransoms seems to have been as insulting a means of retributive defamation in medieval England as fastening or dragging a person or emblem at the animal’s crupper. In 1311 a complaint was brought by William Reymund against the baron John Payne, who had, “with others, assaulted him, . . . cut off the tail of his horse and imprisoned him at Coventry until he found

¹⁰² Matthew Strickland, *War and Chivalry: The Conduct and Perception of War in England and Normandy, 1066–1217* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 98.

¹⁰³ Keen, *Chivalry*, 174–76; Keen, *The Laws of War in the Late Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 173. This insult bears resemblance to the Frankish ritual of public humiliation called “harmscar,” in which a disgraced individual carried a saddle or dog upon his shoulders, thereby turning warrior into beast. Janet Nelson, *The Frankish World, 750–900* (London: Hambledon, 1996), 39. See also Janet Nelson, “Kingship and Royal Government,” in *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, 2: C. 700–c. 900, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 429; Smail and Gibson, *Vengeance in Medieval Europe*, 259.

¹⁰⁴ Keen, *Chivalry*, 175, my emphasis. Andre Alciat, a sixteenth-century jurist and professor of law, attests that if a knight did not appear to make his defense until the day of combat, “some appellants carry the pictures of such dastards about them with exprobation, or their coat-armor reversed, or ignominiously fastened under their horse’s tail, or with such-like disgrace”: William Herbert, *Antiquities of the Inns of Court and Chancery* (London: Verner and Hood, 1804), 125. See also William Alexander Hunter, *A Systematic and Historical Exposition of Roman Law in the Order of a Code* (London: Sweet and Maxwell, 1903), 102–3.

¹⁰⁵ Joseph Hall, *King Horn: A Middle English Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), 87, 175–76; Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe*, 250. For example, in 1242 William de Marisco was dragged to the gallows at a horse’s tail for allegedly attempting to kill Henry III. To quote M. T. Clanchy, “to drag a knight in his shift along the ground by his feet (a drawing of this was done by Matthew Paris) was to reverse his status as an armoured man on horseback.” Alongside this image Paris showed Marisco’s “heraldic shield split in half and reversed and his shattered banner descending to perdition”: *England and Its Rulers, 1066–1307* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 268–69.

¹⁰⁶ Frank Barlow, *Thomas Becket* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 249. Consider Guibert of Nogent’s description of the revolt in Laon in 1112, during which Robert le Mangeur, “a rich and upright man,” was tied by his feet to the tail of a horse and dragged until “his brains were quickly dashed out and he was then placed on the gallows”: as translated by John F. Benton, *Self and Society in Medieval France*, Medieval Academy Reprints for Teaching 15 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 188.

pledges for payment of a ransom.”¹⁰⁷ Likewise, in 1349 John atte Wythegenmull and some accomplices assaulted John Bisshop of Abyndon and imprisoned him “until he made fine with them by 20*l* for his release.” The assailants, moreover, “killed two horses, seven oxen and ten cows of his there, worth 20*l*, and cut off the ears and tails of the rest of his animals and assaulted his men and servants, whereby he lost their service for a great time.”¹⁰⁸ A comparable ritualized emasculation in medieval knighthood, in light of such *deshonoirement*, would be the hacking off of a knight’s spurs during deknighting ceremonies (Fig. 3).¹⁰⁹

Just how profound was the depth of the defamation that knights in the Middle Ages associated with malicious tail excision—and, for that matter, with the insult of being called “tailed”? According to Matthew Paris, the Latin crusaders rushed headlong into the Battle of Mansura (8–11 February 1250) after the Frenchman Robert of Artois (King Louis IX’s brother) publicly insulted the Englishman William Longespee, who was trying to calm divisions within the crusading army:

When behold! the count of Artois stole the words right out of his mouth, indecently swearing and cursing in the French manner, and let loose the following insults heard by many, saying: “Oh the cowardice of you timid tailed men, how blessed, how genteel would the present army be if it was purged of tails and tailed men.” Hearing that, William was ashamed, shaken and inflamed by the offensive words, responding: “O Count Robert, certainly I will proceed undaunted to whatever danger of death awaits. I believe that today I will be where you will not dare to touch the tail of my horse.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1307–1313*, 372; Charles Moor, *Knights of Edward I*, Publications of the Harleian Society 80–84 (London: Harleian Society, 1929–32), 4/4:18–19.

¹⁰⁸ *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1348–1350*, 452. Another possible case involved an appellee who “in-trusit in stabulum predicti Johannis . . . et excutuit caudas equorum predicti Johannis”: N. D. Hurnard, “The Anglo-Norman Franchises,” *English Historical Review* 64 (1949): 289–327, at 310 n. 2.

¹⁰⁹ Keen, *Chivalry*, 174–76; Keen, *The Laws of War in the Late Middle Ages*, 173. According to Walter Meller, during this ignominious procedure a knight was stripped of his armor—which was destroyed and cast at his feet—and then exposed upon a scaffold in his undergarments, while his spurs were thrown upon a dunghill and his shield fastened to the rear of a cart horse and dragged around; finally, his “charger’s tail was cut off”: *A Knight’s Life in the Days of Chivalry*, 69. For example, in 1286, a knight named Osbert Giffard was deprived of his *insignia militaria*—spurs, sword, saddle, and bridle—for having abducted a couple of nuns from the nunnery at Wilton. Likewise, in 1323 Sir Andrew Harclay had his sword broken over his head for plotting treason with Scotland. Moreover, in 1464, as punishment for resisting King Edward IV, Sir Ralph Grey was sentenced to have a cook strike the spurs from his heels and tear his coat of arms off his body: Stephanie Trigg, *Shame and Honor: A Vulgar History of the Order of the Garter* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 136. Apparently a version of this punishment made its way to the American colonies, for deserting soldiers were subjected to “riding the wooden horse” in a most painful manner, much like the image of the disgraced knight shown above in Fig. 3: Robert Fantina, *Desertion and the American Soldier, 1776–2006* (New York: Algora, 2006), 23.

¹¹⁰ “Cum ecce comes Atrabatensis rapiens verbum ab ore ejus, more Gallico reboans et indecenter jurans, audientibus multis os in haec convitia resolvit, dicens, ‘O timidorum caudatorum formidolositas, quam beatus, quam mundus praesens foret exercitus, si a caudis purgaretur et caudatis.’ Quod audiens Willelmus verecundatus, et de verbi offendiculo laccessitus et commotus, respondit; ‘O comes Roberte, certe procedam imperterritus ad quaeque imminentia mortis pericula. Erimus, credo, hodie,

The valiant knights then donned their helmets, banners unfurled, and advanced against the enemy—where they were annihilated. The future Saint Louis was overwhelmed with sadness at news of his brother’s death, though comforted by knowing that his martyrdom had caused Robert to ascend to heaven. The chronicler Joinville attests that “the king responded that God had to be thanked for all that he had given him, and then very large tears fell from his eyes.”¹¹¹

It appears that, because medieval knights treasured their horses—and tails—so much, they could also become the butt of jokes in contemporary literature. For example, in the fabliau *Des tresces* (ca. 1250) a knight loves his horse more than his wife, going so far as to build a stable next to the bedroom. Rejected, his wife becomes adulterous and is soon found out. Anticipating the upcoming thrashing, she hires a bourgeois woman to replace her in the bedroom, who suffers terribly when the enraged knight dons his spurs, domineeringly mounts the substituted wife as if she is a defiant horse in need of being broken in, cuts the locks off her head, stuffs them in his pillowcase, and then falls asleep. The wife returns and is told what happened. She then stealthily slashes her husband’s horse to imitate wounds caused by his spurs and docks it to make him think, upon his awakening, that in his blind fury he had accidentally abused his beloved horse instead of his unfaithful wife: “The greatest joy of all her life / Was at that moment when she put / The horse’s tail which she had cut / Into her husband’s pillowcase.”¹¹² Likewise, in *The Tale of the Tresses*, a man beats his wife for lying with her lover and then rips out her hair to “shame her body also.” As revenge, the wife tricks her husband by cutting off the tail of his palfrey, a similar punishment, and putting it under the head of the bed while he sleeps. Upon discovering his apparent misdeed—that of having mistaken his horse for his wife, in his fit of rage—he exclaims: “Dame . . . so God help me, I thought I had shamed thee for all time and to that end cut off thy hair: but I see it was deception. Never did I dream so ill a dream, for I cut off the tail of my horse, which angers me to think of.”¹¹³

The chroniclers of the crusaders appear to have used the motif of shameful and emasculating equestrian mutilation not only to mock their Muslim adversaries but to emphasize the manliness of their own deeds to a Western audience. Following the crusaders’ demoralizing massacre at the Battle of Hattin (4 July 1187), in 1188, Terricuus, master of the Temple, concluded a letter to Henry II of England by gleefully recounting a recent naval victory in which Saladin’s admiral was captured and his fleet destroyed. According to the letter, Saladin burned

ubi non audebis caudam equi mei attingere”: Matthew Paris, *Chronica majora*, ed. Henry Richards Luard, 7 vols. (repr. Wiesbaden: Kraus, 1964), 5:151.

¹¹¹ Jacques Le Goff, *Saint Louis*, trans. Garath Gollrad (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 713.

¹¹² John DuVal, *Cuckolds, Clerics, and Countrymen: Medieval French Fabliaux* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1982), 72, lines 270–73; Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 62–63.

¹¹³ Margaret Schlauch, *Medieval Narrative: A Book of Translations* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 447–49.

what remained of his fleet with his own hands and, “moved with excessive grief, after cutting off the ears and tail of his horse, rode upon it in the sight of all through the whole army.”¹¹⁴ While the Muslim chronicler ‘Izz al-Dīn ibn al-Athīr agrees that Saladin was very upset at this military setback—“so that he ended up biting his thumb in regret and chagrin”—he makes no mention of the horse’s mutilation, which would likely have been a noteworthy event in the Islamic world.¹¹⁵ In another Western chronicle, Albertus Milioli relates the spectacular reaction of the sultan of Egypt upon receiving word that Damietta had fallen to the crusaders in 1219:

When he heard it, he immediately lost the power of speech. By gesture, he ordered that the messengers of the bad news have their heads cut off, which was done without delay. After having remained for two hours prostrated in great sadness, he arose, drew the sword that he carried at his side and cut off his beard and braids. Then he cut off his horse’s tail and mane. The other Saracens followed his example. They raised their voices in lament, all crying out “O Damietta, until today you were the ever-burning torch of the sons of the Prophet, and now for us you are extinguished. From today you will be the light of the Christians. Why did not I, miserable wretch that I am, die in the womb of my mother? Why did I not die before the virgin Damietta was taken in this reign by the Christians?”¹¹⁶

I have not found any Muslim account corroborating this dramatic incident. Nevertheless, there is evidence that equestrian tail docking was meaningful in the medieval Islamic world. In Firdausi’s *Shahnameh* (ca. 1000), Tahmina, a king’s daughter, has a one-night love affair and subsequently gives birth to a son, Suhrab, who, unrecognized by his father in later years, is killed by him in battle. In grief, Tahmina gives Suhrab’s armor and possessions to the poor, thereby nullifying the chance for any sort of military legacy. Likewise, Tahmina cuts off the tail of the knight’s warhorse, thus transforming the noble steed into a common cart horse.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ As translated by Henry T. Riley in *The Annals of Roger de Hoveden*, 2 vols. (London: Bohn, 1853), 2:90–91. See also Benedict of Peterborough, *The Chronicle of the Reigns of Henry II and Richard I, AD 1169–1192*, ed. William Stubbs, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1867), 2:41: “Reliquae vero galeae Saladini Christianitatis manus evadentes, ad Saladinum et ad exercitum ejus confugerunt, quibus praecerto illius in terram extractis, ipse Saladinus, igne apposito, in cinerem fecit redigi et favillam; nimioque dolore commotus, equi sui auriculas et caudam amputans, equum illum per totum exercitum videntibus omnibus equitavit.”

¹¹⁵ ‘Izz al-Dīn ibn al-Athīr, *The Chronicle of Ibn al-Athīr for the Crusading Period from al-Kāmil fī'l-ta'rikh*, trans. D. S. Richards, Crusade Texts in Translation 13, 15, 17 (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008), 2:356.

¹¹⁶ “Audiens ipse talia statim loquelam perdidit et iussit capita truncari ipsis nunciis; cumque per duas horas esset in hac tristitia, subito se erexit et accepit gladium, quo erat accinctus, et truncavit sibi barbam, et omnes sui ita fecerunt, et eciam caudas equis, et ipse cepit lamentare et dicere: ‘O Damiata, que fuisti usque nunc lucerna paganorum, modo obscurata es nobis. Ego miser, quid faciam? Quo ibo? Quare non mortuus fui in ventre matris mee, aut cum natus fui, cur non statim peri, antequam sub meo dominio virgo Damiata esset a perfidis Christianis violata et corrupta?’”: *Liber duelli Christiani in obsidione Damatiae exacti*, ed. O. Holder-Egger, MGH SS 31 (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1903), 669–705, at 700. See also Arnolfo Fortini, *Francis of Assisi*, trans. Helen Moak (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 419.

¹¹⁷ Olga M. Davidson, “Women’s Lamentations as Protest in the ‘Shahnameh,’” in *Women in the Medieval Islamic World*, ed. Gavin Hambly (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 1998), 131–46, at 142.

RANCOROUS DISPUTES AND DOCKING THE MESSENGER'S HORSE

We now return to the connection between docked horses and nonmilitant clerics. But before discussing why knights disproportionately docked horses belonging to clerics, let us first examine the apparent connection between malevolent tail mutilation and shaming a messenger in medieval England. Both clerics and laymen were instigators of, and fell victim to, this act of violence when delivering unwanted news to a blade-wielding Englishman—or to an émigré attuned to English customs—at least when lands or benefices were involved. Consider five examples, in chronological order, that suggest such a trend. In 1247, a papal mandate was sent to Master Silvester, canon of Saint John's de Duce, Anagni, living in London, to order the clerk Alan de Sancta Fide to restore a church in the diocese of Lincoln to Bartholomew de Roiata, which Alan had taken from Bartholomew “unlawfully and by violence.” Alan refused, “and beating the officer who brought the summons until he destroyed it, was excommunicated. Not content with this, he cut off the left hand of an officer sent by Bartholomew to take possession of the church on the judge’s order, and caught and ill-treated another sent by the same judge, cutting off the tails of his horses and robbing him of the papal letters and other things.”¹¹⁸

The following year, the pope sent another mandate, this time to the bishop of Winchester, commanding him to order another clerk, Philip de Asceles—who held a church in the diocese of Coventry that had been reserved to a bishop-elect—to restore it and make satisfaction: “He [Philip] having beaten the bishop’s proctor, who came to demand restitution, and broken two of his ribs, cut off his horse’s tail, and tied his servant and the horse to a stall; also, when the dean of Wells, commissioned by the pope, would proceed in the affair, Philip procured his detention by the king’s bailiffs until he promised to take no further steps.”¹¹⁹

In 1274, moreover, the king of England authorized his escheator (a royal officer who had charge of lands held temporarily by the king) to take custody of some properties by reason of the majority of the heir John: “But when the escheator sent the sub-escheator and his servants to execute the mandate, Walter, the son and heir of the said John, and his servants assaulted and beat them and cut off the tail of the sub-escheator’s horse. The sheriff is to summon a jury and to arrest those found guilty by inquisition.”¹²⁰

Similarly, in 1320, a notary public named Gilbert de Lutegarshale stated that he had been grievously wounded “because of an instrument that he drew up for the king” that October: “John Talebot, William his brother, and William, now parson of the church of Westbury near Gloucester, attacked him, cut off his horse’s ears, and wounded him so badly that they left him for dead. As a result he is maimed for life. Because the king told him when he drew up the instrument that if he ever wanted anything from him he was to ask for it boldly, he requests the king’s letters for a livery in Hyde abbey or Winchester priory, in relief of his

¹¹⁸ William H. Bliss, *Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers Relating to Great Britain and Ireland: Papal Letters*, 1: AD 1198–1304 (London: H. M. Stationery Office, 1893), 239–40.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 243.

¹²⁰ *Calendar of Patent Rolls*, 1272–1281, 44.

poverty and ill-health.”¹²¹ Considering the perilous nature of Gilbert’s job as notary public and royal messenger, it is entirely possible that his horse had already suffered the loss of its tail during a prior altercation, leaving Gilbert’s current assailants no option but to target the beast’s ears and to maltreat the human courier.

Finally, in 1337 the pope sent another mandate to the bishop of Winchester, this time concerning the clerk Henry de Baghton, who had been appointed to a moiety of a church but was refused presentation by the archbishop of York, who gave it to another man. Yet Henry, “in spite of an appeal to the pope, held it by violence, and cut off the tails of the horses of the chapter, and those of Henry’s proctor and notary, whom they so evilly entreated that they hardly escaped with life.”¹²²

While it would again be rash to attribute the meaning behind spitefully docking the tail of a horse ridden by a messenger bearing unwanted news to developments in medieval canon law, it may still be enlightening that Gratian’s *Decretum* also includes in the category of people who experience “dishonor in fact (*infamia facti*)” “those guilty of bringing false witness or false accusations.”¹²³ It appears, at any rate, that defaming the messenger in such a belligerent and public manner helped the assailant—whether a layman or a cleric—to negate the power of the summons and to shame the sender of the message by debasing his envoy’s horse.¹²⁴ In other words, this act of ritualized violence emasculated both the horse’s rider (the herald) and the rider’s patron (the overlord sending the message). It seems that the performance of ridicule and defamation surrounding prized animals and messengers only became more pointed in England over time. Sometime during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (r. 1558–1603) a complaint was issued: “To Burghley by John Slebbes and other copyholders of Compton Magna, co. Somerset, that Robert Bithasea, mayor of Axbridge, and others have broken the fence of their common on Comptons Moore and made a highway over it. Edward Vyner, a tenant, who said he would ride to London for a subpoena had the ears of his greyhound cut off, and paper sewn on his head, mocking the Queen’s authority that a dog went about to serve her writs.”¹²⁵

¹²¹ National Archives, Kew SC 8/86/4274 (<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/SearchUI/details/C9148816-details>).

¹²² William H. Bliss, *Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers Relating to Great Britain and Ireland: Papal Letters, 2: AD 1305–1342* (London: H. M. Stationery Office, 1895), 541.

¹²³ Peters, “Wounded Names,” 68–69.

¹²⁴ I discuss similar examples of knights and other laymen attacking clerical clothing in order to shame ecclesiastical messengers and negate episcopal mandates in “To ‘Frock’ a Cleric: The Gendered Implications of Mutilating Ecclesiastical Vestments in Medieval England,” *Gender and History* 24 (2012): 271–91, at 283–84.

¹²⁵ National Archives, SP 46/39/fo 246 (<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/SearchUI/Details?uri=C7697201>). It seems that the French, too, at least by the time of Francis I (r. 1515–47), also employed such violence against messengers. On one occasion, students at the University of Paris surrounded a trumpeter who had been sent by the French king to read a proclamation and “cut off his horse’s ears, broke his trumpet as he descended from the stage, and compelled him to seek safety in flight”: John Brewer, *The Reign of Henry VIII from His Accession to the Death of Wolsey*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1883–84), 1:189.

TAIL DOCKING AND THE “RE-EMASCULATION” OF MEDIEVAL CLERICS

In 1152 a Cistercian monk recounted an old adage in a letter to Henry the Liberal: “There is an old proverb and a maxim made famous by the sayings of the ancients: ‘human beings are as distant from animals as *litterati* [clerics] are distant from laymen.’”¹²⁶ Following the Gregorian Reform movement of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, laymen and clerics were distinguished from one another legally in manner of dress and grooming, in regard to having sex and bearing weapons, and even in the types of horses (supposed to be) ridden. While both laymen and clerics fell victim to—as well as perpetrated—the excision of horses’ tails to communicate a scornful message of defamation and emasculation in medieval England, clerics, according to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and R. N. Swanson, were not supposed to be riding horses in the first place, but rather mules.¹²⁷ A good example of the association between clerics and nonmilitant, agricultural horses is seen in the Gilbertine order’s *Institutes of Sempringham* (1147). Canon 19—“Concerning the Docking of Horses”—stipulates, “All of our horses shall be docked, which are destined for carts or wheeled plows. Their manes shall also be cut short and their tails shorn all around (*circumtondeantur*) so that they appear despicable and unsightly.”¹²⁸ The founder of this English religious order, Gilbert (1083–1189), came from Normandy, where his father was a knight. Gilbert was unable, however, to pursue his father’s noble profession because he suffered from a physical deformity at birth.¹²⁹ Nevertheless, like his fellow Norman cleric Ralph of Caen, who also descended from a knightly family, Gilbert presumably understood what it meant for the tail of a warrior’s horse to be purposely cut off—or how to turn this humiliating symbolism to good use for his fellow canons. It seems, then, that knights and other laymen may have added new layers of meaning to the conventional understanding of the ignominy involved in the ritual of docking another man’s horse. In medieval England, moreover, laymen targeted vestments worn by clerics who had altered them to mimic contemporary fashions of the laity—or attacked parks and slaughtered deer during disputes with bishops and abbots—in order to enforce the rule that clerics should not be dressing like laymen and hunting, eating, or riding prized

¹²⁶ Nicholas of Clairvaux, *Epistola 56*, PL 196:1651, as cited and translated in Putter, “Knights and Clerics at the Court of Champagne,” 243.

¹²⁷ Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 48–49; R. N. Swanson, “Angels Incarnate: Clergy and Masculinity from Gregorian Reform to Reformation,” in *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, ed. D. M. Hadley (London: Longman, 1999), 168. See also the discussion of the types of horses ridden in medieval England, above, 969.

¹²⁸ “XIX: De Curtatione Equorum. Omnes equi nostri curtentur, qui destinantur ad quadrigas vel ad carucas. Curtentur etiam et circumtondeantur caudae et colli comae, ut despecti et deformes videantur. Qui vero neglexerit, inobedientiae poena puniatur, et poeniteat in pane et aqua quarta et sexta feria. Similiter qui non tondendos totonderint”: William Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum: A History of the Abbeys and Other Monasteries, Hospitals, Frieries, and Cathedral and Collegiate Churches, with Their Dependencies, in England and Wales*, 6 vols. (London: Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1817–30), 6/2:xlii.

¹²⁹ Interestingly, in 1164 the Gilbertines incurred the wrath of Henry II for helping Thomas Becket flee the kingdom after the Council of Northampton: David Hugh Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), “Gilbert of Sempringham, c. 1083–1189.”

animals in any event. Therefore, by cutting off the tail of a horse ridden or owned by a medieval cleric, the knight or layman docking the beast was conceivably *reinforcing* medieval sumptuary norms and boundaries, albeit in a most aggressive, vengeful, and defaming manner.¹³⁰

A survey of contemporary sources suggests that knights and other laymen specifically targeted horses ridden or owned by ecclesiastics in medieval England. First, the two earliest historical examples of malevolent tail docking—those involving Ivo Taillebois (1071?) and Robert de Broc (1170)—reveal that animals belonging to an abbot and archbishop were marked for mutilation during rancorous disputes.¹³¹ Second, a statistical breakdown of incidents of equestrian disfigurement contained within the tens of thousands of pages of the *Calendar of Patent Rolls* (1216–1452) reinforces the evidence for this trend.¹³² While, of the eight cases found therein, one is an attack on a lay messenger (the subescheator, in 1274, mentioned above), and two others took place between knights in circumstances regarding lands and ransoms (in 1311 and 1349, also mentioned above), the remaining five cases involve knights and other laymen attacking horses belonging to clerics. Most remarkable, perhaps, is that in four of the five incidents the lay assailants paraded the terrorized beasts around, in a public spectacle, with or without a beleaguered man of God mounted upon its back. Finally, six other cases—from royal sources, a bishop’s register, a legal source, and a monastic chronicle—also testify that knights and other laymen in medieval England disproportionately docked the tails of horses belonging to churchmen.

Let us start with the six miscellaneous cases to help see the pattern of these developments. First, in 1247, some assailants “broke a canon’s arm and cut off the tails of his horses and took away his cope.”¹³³ Next, the bishop of Exeter’s scribe recorded in 1273 that the sheriff of Cornwall and others attacked clerics whom the bishop had sent to a local church to threaten the laymen with excommunication for having recently invaded some of his private deer parks. The laymen, however, roughed the clerics up, “dragged them at their horses’ tails,” cut

¹³⁰ Miller, “Knights, Bishops and Deer Parks,” 218–19; Miller, “To ‘Frock’ a Cleric,” 273.

¹³¹ Also, recall that in Ralph of Caen’s humorous anecdote about the Latin crusaders fleeing the Battle of Harran in 1104, it was the patriarch of Antioch, Bernard, who beseeched the warriors to cut off the tail of his mule so it could run away faster.

¹³² See above, n. 98. As explained in the preface to the first volume of Edward III’s patent rolls, the entries include “grants and confirmations of liberties, privileges, offices, dignities, lands, pensions, and wardships, to corporations and individuals, civil and ecclesiastical, licences for elections of bishops, abbots, and others, restitutions of temporalities, presentations to benefices, letters of protection, of credence and of safe-conduct, pardons, special liveries, licences for alienation, commissions, and other miscellaneous documents concerning the prerogatives of the Crown, the revenue, the different branches of the judicature, and the relations of English Kings with foreign powers and persons. It has been justly remarked that ‘there is scarcely a subject connected with the history or government of this country, or with the most distinguished personages of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries, which is not illustrated by the Patent Rolls’: *Calendar of Patent Rolls*, 1327–1330, v, my emphasis.

¹³³ “Brachium suum fregerunt et caudas equorum suorum excurtariaverunt et cappam ipsius canonicu asportaverunt”: Latham, *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, vol. 3, s.v. *excurretare*. Malcolm Jones mistranslates “cappam” as “hat”: “Saints and Other Horse-Mutilators,” 166. See Susan M. Carroll-Clark, “Bad Habits: Clothing and Textile References in the Register of Eudes Rigaud, Archbishop of Rouen,” in *Medieval Clothing and Textiles*, ed. Robin Netherton (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2005), 81–103, at 83–86; Miller, “To ‘Frock’ a Cleric,” 277–78.

their liturgical vestments in a provocative manner, and then “turned their madness upon the dumb animals, that is, their palfreys and other horses, for from some of them they cut the ears, tails and upper lips clean off, others they actually killed, others they mutilated and wounded so as to lay bare the bone.”¹³⁴ This instance, in which horse mutilation was paired with the “dagging” or “slashing” of the clerics’ vestments, is particularly informative, for knights and other laymen employed these provocative acts of violence against clerics during similarly contentious disputes in order to affront episcopal power, disrupt the rite of excommunication, and reinforce sumptuary norms.¹³⁵ Third, in 1305, during a dispute between Sir Philip d’Arcy and the prior of Nopton, Sir Philip “cut off the tail of a horse which one of the canons was riding” and forced one of the priory’s grooms “to kiss the horse’s backside.”¹³⁶ Incidentally, forcing people to kiss the rear end of a horse occurred more often in medieval England than one might think.¹³⁷ Fourth, sometime during the fourteenth century, the monks of Pipewell Abbey, Northamptonshire, were attacked by Robert Boutevileyn, the patron’s son.

¹³⁴ As translated by O. F. Robinson, ed., *The Register of Walter Brunescombe, Bishop of Exeter, 1258–1280*, Canterbury and York Society 82, 87, 94 (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 1995–2003), 2:137–38, no. 1429: “Post caudas equorum traxerunt, et inhumaniter et viliter tractaverunt, sanguinem quoque in ecclesia Dei effuderunt, aliasque atroces iniurias et metum mortis eis intulerunt, sacerdotalem insuper habitum quem gestabant turpiter dehonestarunt, extremitates caputiorum fere usque ad medium et summitates capellorum quas quidem portabant ad modum rasilis corone amputantes, sevientem eorum furorem in bruta animalia, palefridos scilicet et equos eorum dirigendo, nam quorundem ex eis aures, caudes, et superiora labia totaliter absciderunt, quosdam vero interfecerunt, alios mutilarunt et usque ad detectionem ossium vulneraverunt.”

¹³⁵ Miller, “To ‘Frock’ a Cleric,” 272–73.

¹³⁶ “Item presentatum fuit per eosdem quod idem Philippus injuste impedivit priorem de Nopton’ cariare blada sua per quod amisit blada sua ad valenciam centum solidorum. Et preterea deadjunxit rotas caretatarum suarum ita quod amisit opera caretatarum illarum per octo dies et amplius quounque finem fecit eidem Philippo per viginti marcas. Et preterea presentatum [est] quod predictus Philippus amputavit caudam unius equi super quem quidem canonicus equitavit. Et in posterioria parte eiusdem equi fecit quemdam garcionem equum illum osculari”: Meekings, Hunnissett, and Post, *Medieval Legal Records*, 158. This incident may have been related to an ongoing conflict between Philip and the priory, for Bishop Sutton of Lincoln, on 16 February 1297, at Philip’s request, mandated a dean to warn and, if necessary, excommunicate all those who had “maliciously broken open a certain chest in the church of Nopton and stolen charters belonging to the said Sir Philip”: as translated by Rosalind M. T. Hill, ed., *The Rolls and Register of Bishop Oliver Sutton, 1280–1299*, Publications of the Lincoln Record Society 39, 43, 48, 52, 60, 64, 69, 76 (Hereford: Lincoln Record Society, 1948–86), 5:209.

¹³⁷ For example, in 1257 Roger de Rengham was pardoned after being outlawed for making the narrator Nicholas de Lenn “kiss his horse’s hinder parts” and afterwards throwing him into a sewer (“cloacam”): *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1247–1258*, 605. Similarly, in 1292, some assailants beat up a cleric in the diocese of Lincoln and then “heartlessly forced him to kiss the behind of a certain horse” and impeded him from getting his wounds treated: Hill, *Rolls and Register of Bishop Oliver Sutton*, 4:15–16. In 1305, moreover, Robert Godsfield, a minor Lincolnshire landholder, was waylaid by a Lincolnshire magnate and several of his companions near Robert’s manor of Halstead. According to a petition addressed to Edward I and his council, the malefactors “led him up the main road and there they bound him like a prisoner, so that those who passed by on the road and those who were in the nearby fields were able to do what they wanted to him, and they beat and maltreated him almost to death. Later they got him up and made him kiss the tail of a mare which they had brought with them to carry out their judgment”: cited in Bernard McLane, “A Case Study of Violence and Litigation in the Early Fourteenth Century: The Disputes of Robert Godsfield of Sutton-Le-Marsh,” *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 28 (1984): 22–44, at 22. Remarkably, the *Calendar of Patent Rolls* simply states that Robert had been “assaulted,” therefore suggesting that other vague

A furious Robert told the monks and abbot that, if he ever found them riding around on his lands, “he would cut off their horses’ tails in an instant” and maltreat them if they were on foot.¹³⁸ Fifth, in either 1349 or 1350 some “sons of iniquity . . . went to the mill of the Prior and Convent of Worcester . . . with arms,” entered the mill, and beat the miller “and cut off the ears and tail of a palfrey [that was] the property of the church.”¹³⁹ Finally, in 1392, the archdeacon of Buckingham complained that Thomas Coueleye had docked horses belonging to complainants—among other unstated grievances—in order to prevent him from punishing sin in his archdeaconry.¹⁴⁰

We must consider also the five remaining cases—of knights and laymen who targeted horses belonging to clerics—that are found in the voluminous *Calendar of Patent Rolls* before concluding the overall discussion of malevolent equestrian tail excision with the case of Thomas Becket. Let us begin back in Kent—land of the “tailed Englishman.” In 1313, that is, 143 years after Robert de Broc cut off the tail of a horse belonging to Thomas Becket, a band of people invaded the houses of Robert Winchelsey, the archbishop of Canterbury. During the rampage, some assailants seized Richard Cristien, the archbishop’s dean, because he had been sent there “to make certain citations and do other things that were incumbent upon him by reason of his spiritual office.”¹⁴¹ Then, to further express their displeasure, the townspeople “put him on his horse with his face to the tail and inhumanely compelled him to hold the tail and ride, with songs and dances, through that town and afterwards cut off the tail, ears, and lips of his horse, cast the dean in a filthy place, carried away writings, muniments and some privileges of the archbishop in his custody, and prevented him from executing his office.”¹⁴²

Likewise, in 1316, the abbot of Saint Benet’s, Holm, complained to the king that when he sent Roger de Neatishead, a fellow monk, to the hundred of North

entries in such sources likely conceal similar examples of ritualized shaming involving animals, clothing, and so forth: *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1301–1307*, 357.

¹³⁸ “Quid ultra? Vix monachis de curia egressis, supervenerunt de campis homines dicti Roberti, et Henricum de Spalding una cum equo detinuerunt per biduum sive per triduum, videlicet usque ad adventum dicti Roberti. Tunc Robertus nimio furore repletus minabatur abbati et omnibus monachis quod si ipse aliquos illorum inveniret equites, in instanti equos decaudaret, si vero pedites, personas maletractaret. Qui omnes et singuli quasi alterum Herodem eum timuerunt”: Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum*, 5:437.

¹³⁹ As translated by J. W. Willis Bund, ed., *The Register of the Diocese of Worcester, during the Vacancy of the See, 1301–1435* (Oxford: J. Parker, 1897), 223.

¹⁴⁰ National Archives, C 1/68/33 (<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/SearchUI/Details?uri=C7452328>).

¹⁴¹ *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1301–1307*, 197–98, 274–75, 403–4.

¹⁴² *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1301–1307*, 274–75. Richard Kaeuper discusses this incident in light of Geoffrey Chaucer’s Friar: Thomas Hahn and Richard Kaeuper, “Text and Context: Chaucer’s *Friar’s Tale*,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 5 (1983): 85–101. (I would like to thank Professor Kaeuper for his encouraging words and great sense of humor regarding this project when it was in its infancy [at the Twenty-Second Annual Conference of the Illinois Medieval Association, “*Imagining Medieval Identities*,” Carbondale, IL, February 2005].) For more on this form of ritualized shaming see Ruth Mellinkoff, “Riding Backwards: Theme of Humiliation and Symbol of Evil,” *Viator* 4 (1973): 153–76.

Erpingham on business, Roger de Antyngham, along with his brother Nicholas and some other companions, assaulted the monk on his way back to the abbey. The assailants then “took him from place to place through the fields of the town, cut off the tail of the abbot’s horse on which the monk was seated,” and surrounded the abbot’s manor, in order to starve the monks out. As a result of such violence—and overt threats of further violence—the abbot’s retainers were too frightened to work the abbey’s lands.¹⁴³ In 1348, moreover, the abbot of Fourney bought a commission of *oyer and terminer* in order to seek redress against William de Asmonrelowe, William de Baglay, John de Tornerg, and others who had stolen the abbot’s goods, assaulted his underlings, “and cut off the tail of his horse whereupon brother John de Lyndeby, his fellow monk, was riding.”¹⁴⁴ Similarly, in 1357, John de Pavely, prior of the Hospital of Saint John of Jerusalem in England (a knight hospitaller), with his confreres, took Simon Warde of Buxton, who was the bishop of Lincoln’s servant and clerk, and assaulted him because he dared to cite John to appear before the bishop. While technically this was an attack against a messenger, the knights chose to charivari Simon as well. First, they “stole from him the citation and other letters and instruments of the said bishop, whereby the matters remained undone,” and then

threw him in a stank of water there, and kept in the water as far as to submersion until to escape death he made oath not to sue against the prior or any other of the said transgressors by reason of any trespass done to him, in the king’s court or elsewhere, and that afterwards, drawing him out of the stank they assaulted and grievously wounded him and likewise maimed his horse, worth 100s. and cut off its tail and ears, then set him, so wounded, thereon and led him through the market of the town in the sight of all the people assembled there with loud shouting (*ingenti clamore*).¹⁴⁵

Finally, in 1418, a group of knights attacked properties belonging to the abbot of Evesham. They assaulted his servants and “unyoked a horse of his from one of the carts and cut off its tail and afterwards caused it to be taken bleeding thence by the abbot’s carters, who dared not resist for fear of death, to the said town of Evesham and through the full market of the town.”¹⁴⁶

In several of these incidents involving laymen and clerics, violence appears to have been intended to terrify priests and monks during disputes, to thwart a dean or archdeacon from performing his spiritual duties, or to disrupt clerics from carrying out a sentence of excommunication. In each case, moreover, the tail and ear mutilation seems to have been meant to defame, emasculate, and make illegitimate the victim’s ecclesiastical overlord, whether abbot, bishop, or archbishop. In the case involving Thomas Becket, it appears that Robert de Broc and his comrades docked the horse in the archbishop’s service—as well as stole his hunting dogs and butchered his deer—to put the former layman back into his feminized, clerical state.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ *Calendar of Patent Rolls*, 1313–1317, 496–97.

¹⁴⁴ *Calendar of Patent Rolls*, 1348–1350, 164.

¹⁴⁵ *Calendar of Patent Rolls*, 1354–1358, 555, 557.

¹⁴⁶ *Calendar of Patent Rolls*, 1416–1422, 147.

¹⁴⁷ Miller, “Knights, Bishops and Deer Parks,” 218–19.

THOMAS BECKET: MASCULINE EQUESTRIAN OR FEMINIZED CLERIC?

Thomas Becket and his king were both avid equestrians. Horses figured prominently in their tumultuous relationship, in both personal and symbolic ways. Anyone who knew Becket—including members of the local Broc family—understood that publicly attacking Becket's animals was a performance enacted, as Hugh Thomas recently explained, “within a social system in which the intertwined concepts of shame, honor, and masculinity carried enormous weight (which explains why so many writers were interested in the story of the archbishop's horse).”¹⁴⁸ Becket and Henry II's contentious bond was in some ways defined by an equestrian—or masculine—competitiveness. According to one chronicler, Henry II worked equestrian imagery into his infamous outburst that spurred the four knights to murderous action against the archbishop of Canterbury: “Shall this fellow, who came to court on a lame horse, with all his estate in a wallet behind him, trample upon his king, the royal family, and the whole kingdom? Will none of all those lazy cowardly knights whom I maintain, deliver me from this turbulent priest?”¹⁴⁹ The two great men even wrestled one another while riding horses through the streets of London. William FitzStephen relates the story. One winter's day, Becket, who was then chancellor, and the king were riding together (“coequitabant”) when they came across a man wearing a threadbare coat. Henry turned to his companion and said, “Do you see that man? How poor, how feeble, how naked he is! Would it not be a great act of charity to give him a thick, warm cloak?” When Becket concurred, Henry said to him: “You will have credit for this act of charity.” He then began manhandling his chancellor, seizing his hood and pulling the cloak—which was a new, quality one, “of scarlet and gray”—off his back. Becket struggled mightily to keep his fine garment, and soon the two men were causing quite a scene, thrashing about astride their steeds. Henry's attendants rode up, alarmed and bewildered by the struggle. Reluctantly, Becket let his king win the contest, suffering him to drag the cloak from his shoulders and give it to the grateful pauper. Henry explained what the fuss was all about, and the knightly party had a great laugh, with some members offering their own cloaks and mantles to Becket.¹⁵⁰ W. L. Warren, in his biography of

¹⁴⁸ Thomas, “Shame, Masculinity, and the Death of Thomas Becket,” 1088, or, as Francis Watt put it nearly a century ago: “Finally on Christmas Eve they [Brocs] cut off the tails of his sumpter mule and one of his horses. These were petty but peculiarly irritating insults. With all his asceticism, Thomas was a judge of, and had a relish for good wine and fine horses. Probably he had a lingering interest in the chase though he no longer practised it; moreover we know to the last his stalls held a superb steed carefully fed and groomed. . . . The trick seems that of a schoolboy, but it was characteristic of the medieval temperament. Moreover Saltwood was his own castle which the De Brocs had seized”: *Canterbury Pilgrims and Their Ways* (New York: Methuen, 1917), 7. For a brief summary of other examples of “dramatic gesturing” between Becket and Henry II see Henry Mayr-Harting, *Religion, Politics and Society in Britain, 1066–1272* (London: Pearson, 2011), 86–87.

¹⁴⁹ Translation from Arthur Bailey Thompson, *The Victoria History of England* (London: Routledge, 1865), 83.

¹⁵⁰ “Una dierum coequitabant in strata Londoniae; stridebat deformis hyems; eminus aspexit rex venientem senem, pauperem, veste trita et tenui; et ait cancellario, ‘Videsne illum?’ Cancellarius, ‘Video,’ Rex, ‘Quam pauper, quam debilis, quam nudus! Numquidne magna esset eleemosyna dare ei crassam

Henry II, notes that “there is a hint of gentle mockery” both in this amusing incident and in the king’s habit of concluding his hunting trips by riding his horse into Becket’s hall while he was dining and—still dressed in his soiled hunting gear—bounding across the table and plopping himself down amid the finely attired courtiers to partake in the meal.¹⁵¹

It seems likely that the king’s sometimes good-humored taunting and competitive spirit stemmed from the fact that Thomas Becket, although fifteen years older than Henry, was a gifted athlete, capable hunter, and equestrian of great ability and fame; Becket had fought in Henry II’s campaigns in 1159, unhorsing many worthy knightly opponents.¹⁵² Once he became archbishop, moreover, Becket continued to ride frequently, despite the fact that such behavior was considered inappropriate, as it was more suited to knights than clerics. Yet it was precisely because of his steady horsemanship and wide travels that, after his martyrdom, Becket was often portrayed in iconography astride a horse (Fig. 4). In two extant representations, in fact, Becket is depicted mounted upon a horse with a mob of people jeering at him as they dock the beast (Figs. 5 and 6).¹⁵³ The artists may have intended to emphasize or even exaggerate the humiliation Becket suffered prior to his execution, thereby making an implicit comparison to the humiliation of Christ on his way to crucifixion. While the archbishop was certainly not, in historical fact, astride the packhorse that was bringing him supplies when it was docked¹⁵⁴—though the mutilated animal was later brought to him for

et calidam capam?’ Cancellarius, ‘Ingens equidem; et ad hujusmodi animum et oculum, rex, habere deberes.’ Interea pauper adest; rex substitit, et cancellarius cum eo. Rex placide compellat pauperem, et querit si capam bonam vellet habere. Pauper, nesciens illos esse, putabat jocum, non seria agi. Rex cancellario, ‘Evidem tu hanc ingentem habebis eleemosynam;’ et injectis ad caputum ejus manibus, capam, quam novam et optimam de scarleta et grysio indutus erat, rex cancellario auferre, ille retinere, laborabat. Fit igitur ibi motus et tumultus magnus: divites et milites, qui eos sequebantur, mirati accelerant scire quaenam esset tam subita inter eos causa concertandi; non fuit qui diceret; intentus erat uterque manibus suis, ut aliquando quasi casuri viderentur. Aliquandiu reluctatus cancellarius, sustinuit regem vincere, capam sibi inclinato detrahere, et pauperi donare. Tunc primum rex sociis suis acta narrat; risus omnium ingens; fuerunt qui cancellario capas et pallia sua porrigeant. Cum capa cancellarii pauper senex abit, praeter spem locupletatus et laetus, Deo gratias agens”: Robertson and Sheppard, *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket*, 3:24–25.

¹⁵¹ W. L. Warren, *Henry II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 80–81.

¹⁵² Robertson and Sheppard, *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket*, 3:34–35. According to James Robertson, Becket is described to us as “tall and handsome in person, . . . an accomplished chess player, a master in hunting, falconry and other manly exercises”: *Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury: A Biography* (London: J. Murray, 1859), 26. Likewise, James Serpell explains that “when Thomas a Becket toured France in the twelfth century, as Henry II’s ambassador, his entourage included a multitude of horses and hounds as well as a veritable menagerie of tame monkeys. *The horses and hounds reflected Becket’s obsessive interest in hunting*, but the monkeys were undoubtedly pets”: *In the Company of Animals: A Study of Human-Animal Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 37–38, my emphasis. For details on Becket’s entourage see Hyland, *The Medieval Warhorse*, 103–4.

¹⁵³ Tancred Borenius, “The Iconography of St Thomas of Canterbury,” *Archaeologia* 79 (1929): 29–54, esp. 32.

¹⁵⁴ Peculiarly, according to Malcolm Jones, Robert de Broc or his nephew “cut off the tail of the horse upon which the shortly to be martyred Thomas a Becket was riding (*tota cauda curtari in*

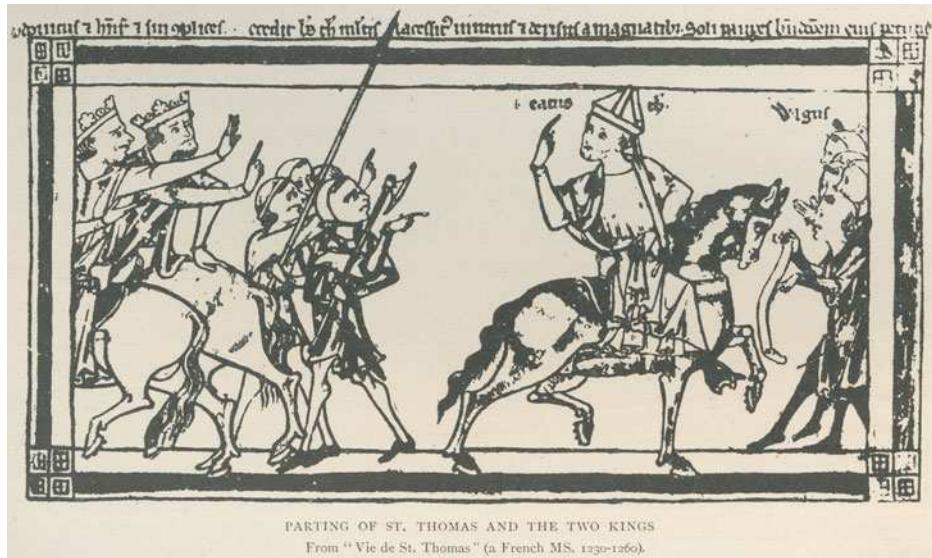


Fig. 4. Parting of Thomas Becket and the Two Kings, ca. 1230–60, from Walter Besant, *Mediaeval London*, 2 vols. (London: A. & C. Black, 1906), 1:277.
(Photo: courtesy of Special Collections, DePaul University Library)

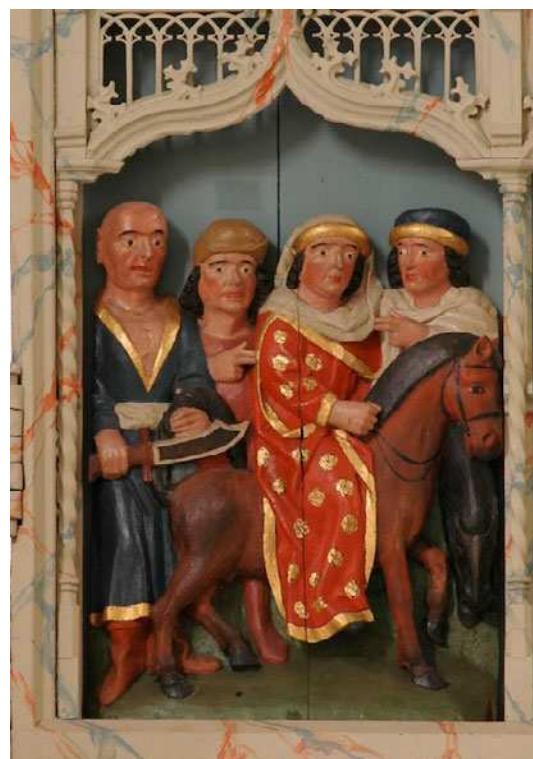


Fig. 5. Altarpiece, right wing, Martinskirche, Tettens, Wangerland, ca. 1520.
(Photo: Groenling. Reproduced with permission)



Fig. 6. Master Francke, *The Mocking of Saint Thomas Becket*, ca. 1424. Panel from the Saint Thomas Altarpiece, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany.
(Photo: Elke Walford. Reproduced with the permission of the photographer and Art Resource, NY)

dedecus archiepiscopi)": "Saints and Other Horse-Mutilators," 164, my emphasis. See instead Thomas, "Shame, Masculinity, and the Death of Thomas Becket," 1050. This is not to say, however, that Becket never rode a packhorse. Following Becker's flight from the Council of Northampton in 1164, his legs became so cramped after crossing to France in a small skiff that he begged his brothers to carry him to safety. Herbert of Bosham relates this "itinerary of the fleeing Thomas as an example of humility." In order to accommodate the archbishop, his comrades found a packhorse—for a mere shilling—which was equipped with no harness but only a halter. Bosham exclaims: "What a sight to see Thomas, once on chariots and horses, now astride a packhorse, with only a halter around its neck for a bridle and the rags of the poor brothers and lay brothers on its back for a saddle! What a change of circumstances, Thomas! Where are all those horses and knights you used to have, all those rich and ostentatious trappings? Look at all these now reduced to one packhorse and one halter, and not even your packhorse or halter but another's. As you change, the things belonging to you change, as your old things pass away and all become new. Truly God is marvelous in his saints": Staunton, *The Lives of Thomas Becket*, 120–22.

inspection—the medieval artists chose to conflate Becket with his docked horse, as it were, by mounting him upon it, thereby emphasizing the humiliation and infamy intended to the animal's owner via the malicious tail docking. The painting by Meister Francke (ca. 1380–ca. 1440) transforms the packhorse into a fine white steed equipped with golden bridle and stirrups; Becket, bearing matching golden spurs, gazes back down upon his aggressors with a look of dismissive forgiveness while blood streams from the stump of his horse's tail (Fig. 6).¹⁵⁵ Indeed, it was precisely because of Becket's equestrian abilities and his association with horses that the docking of his living, feeling horse at the hands of the Broc family was, even more than usual, a personal humiliation, a humiliation that helps to explain why medieval churchmen felt obliged to deflect the grave insult by glorifying it in histories, hagiographies, and art designed for posterity. The lay assailants were seemingly aware of the effeminating nature of this particular type of shaming in their dispute with Becket and used it accordingly. In sum, cutting off the tail of Becket's horse served as the perfect public message of ridicule, emasculation, and defamation to reemphasize the archbishop's clerical (effeminate) identity while belittling his equestrian (manly) past.

¹⁵⁵ Tancred Borenius, *St Thomas Becket in Art* (London: Methuen, 1932), 58–59. It also appears that the assailant grasping the excised tail in his right hand is likening the appendage to his own phallus, while contemptuously pointing at the archbishop with his left hand.

Andrew G. Miller is Instructional Associate in the Department of History, DePaul University, 2320 North Kenmore Avenue, Chicago, IL 60614-3298 (e-mail: amille29@depaul.edu).